



Betrayed Alpha Bride (Wolfshade Brides-for-Hire #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: The Brides-for-hire agency matches me with my secret baby's daddy...

He rejected me because our love was forbidden. I was an outcast.
He was the Alpha.

I left our small town, but my baby is showing signs of shifting...I have to join a new pack.

But when I sign up for a matching agency...my match is the Alpha who rejected me.

I didn't have the shifter gene, so I was subjected to relentless bullying and mockery.

My mate cut me out of his life due to my low status, but not before giving me a secret baby.

Now I'm thrust back into his arms, into his cruel coldness.

I want to run away from him, but I can't, for my baby's sake.

I vowed to leave our bond in the past, but no matter what I do, it's still alive.

It's alive in the way his dark eyes follow me wherever I go.

It's alive in the way his cold fingers trace the shape of my curves.

He's opening the bleeding wounds he caused, the skin he tore open.

When I give myself to the Alpha...will he reject me again?

The Wolfshade Brides-for-Hire Agency arranges marriages and temporary partnerships for shifters. The matches are perfect...even if it means that enemies turn into lovers, rejected mates turn out to be fated, and broken hearts are crushed again before they're healed forever

Page 1

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Cool air caresses my skin, a hint of ice in the breath of wind that stirs through the room. It does nothing to soothe me. Warm sweat beads on my brow and trickles uncomfortably down my sides, making me itch.

I have to help my son, but I don't know what to do!

Sitting up, I punch the cushions behind me, trying to get more comfortable on the couch. It doesn't matter how many times I readjust. I can't settle, and I know it's not the couch's fault.

As I flick through pages on my phone, a dull pain spreads across my forehead.

Great. Now I've got eye strain as well as a stress headache.

I put the phone down for a second, my vision blurry from staring at the rolling pictures and text. I was scrolling so fast, I wasn't even absorbing the information.

Like I'm going to find anything on the internet that would help me. This is a stupid idea!

Taking a deep breath, I swing my feet to the floor and put my hands on my temples, massaging them. Stress has been building in me by the day, and I know if I don't help my son soon, terrible things are going to happen.

For seven years, we've been safe in West Glacier, Montana. It's been a peaceful, quiet existence, without interference from the pack or their damn politics.

I was an outcast there... born without a shifter gene, a freak, a dangerous anomaly. Even before the incident, I wanted to leave.

My mind violently shies away from remembering why I abandoned my pack. I fled from Quartz Key to West Glacier, the nearest town to the range inhabited by werewolves, the mythic creatures I'm supposed to be related to.

In the human world, these places have their own names, but to us, the mountains and valleys between Rainbow Peak and Mount Oberlin are called Wolfshade. The area is scattered with small towns unknown to humans, linked by a road called Lycan Pass.

Just thinking about it stirs homesickness in me. I do miss the wild peaks and deep valleys, the heavy feel of magic in the air wrapping me in comfort and safety. But living in the human world is difficult. I have to keep my guard up at all times.

It would be good to go home... and I may have no choice.

My son, Nico, has begun to show signs of shifting soon, and I can't help him—because I can't change. I was never able to shift, and other wolves don't recognize me as one of them. More than once, I was told my scent disturbed the others because I smelled like a human.

I'm just a dull, ordinary human, not a shifter, a witch, or any other magical creature. So painfully "normal" that I disrupted the magical system that permeates the air throughout Wolfshade.

The first night I walked in on Nico having a vicious nightmare, it ripped my soul in two. Not just because my son was in pain, but because I can't help him, and I will never be able to.

I have no options. None. I can't watch my son suffer!

His nightmares are getting worse and more frequent. Nico tosses and turns, boiling hot and sweating with fever almost every night. He tells me he dreams of being chased through the forest, a predator on his heels with sharp teeth that runs him down. He always wakes just as it pounces.

It's his wolf. And it will haunt him until he embraces it and changes for the first time.

Nico needs guidance to work through his first change, and it will be traumatic for him even if he has help. If the change goes badly, he could be injured, scarred for life, trapped in his wolf shape forever, or go mad.

There are endless options, really, and none of them are pretty.

Sighing, I reach for my phone again and flop back onto the couch. I've been randomly searching lore about werewolves and other magical creatures, hoping to find something helpful. All legends and stories have roots in fact, and I had no other choice but to try.

My eyes start to ache again as link after link comes up, all of it modern, trope-driven, creature-feature stuff. I'm almost ready to close my phone in defeat when a bright blue pop-up blinks at the bottom of the screen.

I've pretty much trained myself to never look at ads, but my eyes are immediately drawn to it.

Why is there an ad for a bride service on a page about werewolves in American history?

My thumb hovers, ready to close the page. But at the last second, I tap on the ad.

What the fuck am I doing?

Welcome to Porter's "bride for hire" service! Please click [here](#) to register your interest!

I tap on the big pink button, and the loading screen twirls for a few seconds before a chat thread comes up.

Hi, welcome to Porter's matching service! Can you tell me where you were born?

I hesitate for a second before simply typing "USA."

Which town, please? Be as specific as possible, even if the town isn't well-known.

A slightly evil grin twists on my lips. I know exactly how to get out of this chat—by giving a "fake" town.

Crystal Key, Lycan Pass.

That's fantastic! We have a match waiting for a bride in that exact area. Do you know the pack personally?

My thumb is frozen above the screen as I stare at the words in shock. What the fuck is going on? I think in panic.

Don't worry! Here at Porter's, we are aware of the otherworld, and your privacy is our first priority! Everything is strictly confidential to protect you and your husband-to-be! Can you fill out this questionnaire?

I shake my head slowly, letting out the deep breath I've been holding. The next page opens, and I click through the questions, adding details about myself.

Wonderful! Thank you, Clara. We'd like to invite you to a meeting at Apgar

tomorrow afternoon. Does that suit you?

Tomorrow? I type the word as fast as it flashes through my mind.

There is urgency on both sides here, Clara. You need help, and so does the gentleman in question. We'd like the match to be made as quickly as possible.

But what about my son?

Your son will be made welcome in this relationship, I assure you! You can bring him with you, or not, as you like, but it might be better to meet your new husband on your own terms first.

I stare at the screen, nerves bubbling in my stomach until it threatens to boil over.

You need help for your son, don't you, Clara?

I stare at the screen, feeling like the voice on the other side of it knows way too much.

Yes.

Your son will get the help he needs, Clara. Please trust me on that. The other party is very eager to meet you both. If it comforts you at all, know that the money will be wired into your preferred account as payment for this assignment straight away. We pay our brides well! I can personally promise full support for you and your son.

I stare at the screen, my gut twisting. This is all too weird. I was looking for a way to help my son, and I didn't think clicking on a link for mail-order brides was going to be the ticket.

I only entertained this out of curiosity, I think. Then the mention of Lycan Pass...

obviously, this is putting me into a pack, and Nico needs that badly. I didn't want to do this just for money, but to be fair, I don't have much of that, either.

My phone buzzes in my hand.

Are you still there, Clara?

Yes , I type . I'm still here.

Are you willing to meet at Apgar tomorrow afternoon?

My chest feels so tight, I can barely move, and my stomach twists into a ball of nerves. I'm sweating again, and my back feels hot and itchy. Finally, my trembling fingers type the words.

I'll be there.

The next afternoon, I'm standing at the edge of Lake McDonald, watching the rippling water and trying to stay calm. North to northeast of here, along the edge of the lake, a secret road runs all the way to Glacier National Park. From there, Lycan Pass leads to Wolfshade, and right at the end, near Rainbow Peak and Quartz Lake, is our hometown, Quartz Key.

The silence of the area is softly enhanced by the rippling waves, the sighing wind, and the occasional bird cry. I keep my eyes on the lake, trying not to look into the nearby woods where the secret path is.

Thoughts of my son creep into my mind. I wrestle between doing this for him and potentially creating a situation where he won't be happy, but having to live with it.

I've been lucky. He's never really asked about his father. What am I supposed to tell

him about this?

Nico barely brought up his dad, but he did ask about our magical heritage and why we lived in the human world. I hoped he would be like me—just human and normal—but obviously, he always knew he was different, even before the shifter gene began to manifest.

I swallow a lump in my throat, wondering if I did the wrong thing by raising him in the human world away from his own kind.

I had no choice!

“Clara?”

A smooth, clear voice cuts through my frantic thoughts. As I turn around, my gaze focuses on a statuesque woman standing behind me. She’s tall and slender, with slight curves that are enhanced by a perfectly tailored suit in pastel pink. A white silk collar peeks out at the edge of the fitted jacket’s finely cut lapels, and the knee-length skirt shows off her long, slim legs.

Even though the area is rugged, she’s wearing killer pink pumps. They’re higher than anything I’d ever attempt to wear, even on a flat surface.

“Yes?” I answer.

“I’m Iris Porter, the head of the agency. It’s so nice to meet you!” she replies warmly. When she cocks her head and smiles, her pale gray eyes sparkle.

“Thanks,” I say. “You too.” I walk to her and shake her hand. Her grip is firm but not hard, and immediately, I get a good feeling about her. She’s so perfectly put together, it’s difficult not to feel threatened—even every inch of her very long blond hair is

pulled into a twist at the back of her head without a single hair escaping to trail around her pretty face.

“I hope you don’t mind me bringing coffee for you,” she says, sitting down at a nearby picnic table and gesturing to the bench across from her. “I just thought it would save time. So, here—sweet, milky cappuccino with extra chocolate.”

Iris hands the cup to me, and I stare at it warily.

How does she know how I like my coffee?

“How are you feeling?” Iris asks. “Nervous, or excited?”

“Both,” I admit. “I really can’t decide how I’m feeling.”

Iris chuckles. “That’s completely normal, don’t worry. I promise you, I will be there to support you every step of the way.”

“Thank you,” I say. “I appreciate that.”

My stomach flips again, and I take a sip of coffee to cover my discomfort. I don’t want to go home to Quartz Key—in fact, it’s the last thing I want to do, but it’s the only thing that can help Nico. I take some comfort from the fact that I’ll be matched and married, meaning the old hurts from my past won’t be able to touch me.

Maybe I won’t even have to see him again.

I mentally scoff at that thought. Fat chance of that happening!

“Okay, Clara,” Iris says, opening her briefcase, “I’ll just get you to go through your contract and sign. Your partner should be here any minute. Once I have your

signature, the contract is binding.”

“How binding?” I ask. “What if it doesn’t work out... or if there’s another claim on me?”

Iris smiles, shaking her head a little. “Our matches are for life. It’s very doubtful there will be any other claims on your heart, and so far, none of our matches have had difficulties. I’m very good at what I do, dear.”

Even though I’m not entirely convinced, I take the pen from her hand. I flick briefly through the contract, but it’s three pages of mostly legal jargon I don’t really understand, so I just sign it and hand the pen back.

“How long will we have to wait?” I ask, my anxiety starting to rise. “Shouldn’t he be here by now?”

“He is here,” Iris says, turning around. “I’m pretty sure he just arrived. I felt the disturbance at the edge of the hidden road.”

Felt?

Is she a wolf? A witch? What is she?

“Just walk up towards the lake, dear, and see if you can see someone coming,” Iris suggests.

I get up and head towards the lake, my heart in my throat and my stomach wrapped in tight knots. I’m starting to wonder what I’ve done—binding myself into a contract with a man I don’t even know.

Well, chances are I do know him. Quartz Key isn’t that big.

I take a deep breath and hold it as I approach the lake, trying to calm down. I have to do this for Nico. He needs to be back in the pack, surrounded by wolves again, and with a shifter who can help him through his first change.

He could die if he doesn't get help. I have to do this!

That's when the air shimmers ahead of me, like heatwaves radiating from scorching-hot bitumen. I know it's the disturbance of a being coming through the barrier from the hidden road. After a second, the air stops bubbling, and the shape of a man solidifies.

He has his back to me, looking out over the lake. He's wearing a long, fitted trench coat that flaps against his legs, billowing a little in the wind. I can't see much of him except his ash-blond hair and tall stature.

Something about the set of his shoulders...

The curiosity inside me disappears, replaced by intense, cold panic. My heart is frozen, and my guts have exploded into butterflies. My knees shiver violently, and I stop walking, just staring ahead at the man silhouetted against the sheen on the water.

No, no, no!

As if sensing me, he turns, looking slowly over his shoulder. His eyes are dark, almost black.

But I know they're green. Right up close, looking straight into them, those eyes are deep green... like needles on winter pines.

It can't be!

When he speaks, his voice is deep but musical, just how I remember it.

“Hello, Clara.”

Galen.

Of all the wolves in the world, it had to be Galen!

Nico’s father.

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The moment I stepped through the barrier, I caught her scent.

I thought I had to be imagining it at first, an illusion called up by her memory. Of course, I'd think of her today. How could I not?

Clara.

As the sweet, sugary scent drifts across my face, my mouth starts to water. It's like honey or rich, golden syrup drizzled over a warm cinnamon cake. It overwhelms me, and my whole body tingles as I let the intense smell waft across my tongue.

My wolf is panting right now.

Instead of turning towards the park as I come through the barrier, I look out over the lake and try to regain control. There's no point in trying to convince myself the scent isn't real. It's all around me now, blowing through the air, caught by the wind, and sweeping across my face.

Just like Grandma's kitchen on a cold winter night. The warmth of the fire, the delicious scent rising from the oven and filling the room. Safety, comfort, and utter indulgence.

I take a breath and hold it, gathering my courage to turn around and face her. Ever since I agreed to this meeting, I've been thinking of Clara, knowing I could never commit to anyone else. This whole thing was a sham. A joke.

If this is real, I'll have to apologize to Winnie.

My meddling sister, always interfering in my life and trying to push my buttons. She got me good with this one, but this time her prank turned out to be a gift.

First time for everything.

Turn around, you coward!

As I look over my shoulder, I can hear Clara's light steps on the grass behind me. Her scent is as thick and sweet as the sugar and spice it reminds me of, and my heart starts to pound so hard, I can feel it in my temples.

She stops behind me, freezing as soon as she sees my face. I turn around fully and face her, hearing her heartbeat suddenly speed up, pounding twice as hard in her chest.

For a moment, we just stare at each other. I stretch out all my wolf senses, trying desperately to find some clue of how she's feeling. All I'm getting is her raging heartbeat and light, shallow breathing. The added warmth to her body makes her scent even stronger.

All of this could mean excitement from her... or fear.

Please don't fear me.

My fingers twitch as the thought streaks through me. I want to grab her, press her to my chest, and never let anything hurt her ever again.

But I'm the one who hurt her.

I'm sorry!

“Galen?” she says, tilting her head. Her voice is smooth and even, but her heart is still hammering in her chest. I’m impressed that she can look so calm when her insides are in such turmoil.

“Clara...” I try to say, but I can’t raise my voice above a soft, reverent whisper. A slight frown crosses her pretty features, and I’m just as enchanted by it as I have always been by her smile.

What I wouldn’t give to see that smile again. I swear, my love, I will make you smile again.

Just let me try.

Clara folds her arms tightly across her chest and looks up at me, sticking her chin out a little in defiance. Her pale gold eyes narrow, and the edges of her mouth turn down. When her bottom lip trembles, I have to fight the urge to reach out and stroke it with my thumb.

“This must be a mistake,” she announces. “We need to discuss this with Iris. Immediately.”

Even though her voice is high-pitched and tight, she doesn’t move. I struggle to respond, caught between finding the right words and feasting my eyes upon her, ravishing every inch of her with my gaze like a starving man.

I have been starving every single second since she left.

“Galen, are you alright?” she asks, her voice hard. I can hear her heart still hammering, and her breath almost wheezing through her tight chest, but I’m beginning to think it’s from anger more than excitement.

She doesn't want to see me... and why should she?

"It's been a long time, Clara," I say.

Her eyes widen, and I'm lost in pools of shimmering gold. Her eyes are the color of honey, lit from within so they glimmer like gems when any strong emotion takes her.

With that thought, I'm caught in a memory of her in my arms, gasping with pleasure as her eyes stared deeply into mine. She's in my hands, writhing, screaming out in joy.

Screaming my name.

"Galen," she snaps. "We need to talk about this."

Her tone and the still-hard look on her face drag me back to reality. It's painful to return from the memory, and to see the pain in her eyes.

I deserve this. I deserve all of this.

"Yes," I answer, still not really knowing what to say. "We should."

Clara's eyes narrow again, and she shivers, hugging her arms a bit tighter against her chest. She's wearing a long gray coat that reaches down to her thighs, so all I can see of her outfit is a hint of dark green at her collar, black tights on her shapely legs, and black, knee-high boots.

"Let's go and sit down," she suggests. "Iris can sort this out."

"Wait," I reply, reaching for her. "Just wait a second."

She takes a step back, glaring at my hand as she jams her own into her pockets. “Don’t touch me, Galen,” she snaps.

“Okay,” I mutter, my throat tight. “I was just—”

“I know,” she cuts me off. “I just want to get that boundary straight.”

Her voice falters, just slightly. At the same time, her scent thickens a little, and her heart slows to a dull throb.

I close my eyes as I sense the heat gathering in her. Her chest, hands, and inner thighs are starting to glow like a well-lit forge.

Oh, God. She’s aroused. She’s still hot for me—

“Come on!” she snaps again, her face flushing as if she knows what I’m sensing. “We have to talk to Iris.”

Clara takes swift, decisive steps across the path towards the picnic tables, and I have no choice but to follow. I can’t stop looking at her long, shapely legs as she strides ahead of me. I’m struck by the casual glamour of the high boots.

Flat heels. Practical as ever. She could walk anywhere in them... but they are also sexy as hell.

Clara always had a knack for looking understated but stunning at the same time. No matter what she wore, it looked like the perfect combination of comfort, practicality, and barely restrained sex appeal to me.

I might be biased.

When we get back to the tables, Clara stops and looks around, frowning with confusion.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Iris was just here. Now she’s gone. That’s my coffee, right there on the table. I thought she was going to wait for us.”

I shrug. “Maybe she is just really busy.”

“But we both have to sign the contract.”

“I did it already,” I reply, now just as confused. “I used a digital signature.”

Clara stares at me. “But she told me... oh, never mind. Sit down so we can figure this out.”

“Okay,” I answer, starting to feel like my voice might be under my control again. I can’t stop staring at her, like I can’t believe she’s real. I lived so many years thinking I would never see her again.

I have never stopped loving her... and I can’t believe I did what I did.

If I could, my love, I’d take it all back.

When I first started dating her, I knew that the rest of the pack considered her to be strange, but I had no idea how bad it actually was. On our first date, she asked if it was okay for us to be together, and I answered yes, of course it was... not understanding what she really meant.

I heard the others whisper and make jokes about her. They called her a freak born

without a shifter gene.

Even with the way my family talked about her with an edge of disdain. I still didn't realize how bad it was.

We spent a couple of wonderful months together. To this day, I remember it as the happiest time of my life.

As I look into her pretty face, I can't believe what I did to her. In the last seven years, though, I've grown up. And I know I'll never let anyone else come between me and someone I love.

I flinch a little as I remember my family yelling at me, my parents and the pack elders reminding me that I'm going to be the alpha and can't waste time on a freak who can't even shift.

My hands clench slowly into fists as I look across the table at the only woman I've ever loved. I believed my family—I went against my own instincts, my own judgment—and now I know I'll never do it again.

I have a second chance now, and by God, I'm going to take it.

"Look, there isn't much to talk about here," Clara says, her voice flat. "Obviously, we aren't doing this."

"I've committed and signed the contract. I thought it was legally binding, now that we've both signed it?" I say, my voice surprisingly steady.

"Yes, Iris said that to me as well," Clara says, frowning. "But she also assured me the match would be favorable. She's obviously made a huge mistake."

“I don’t think it’s a mistake,” I counter, a hard edge creeping into my voice.

Clara’s beautiful eyes widen, absorbing the sunlight and shimmering with depths of gold. I’m enchanted when I look at her. There’s really no other word for it.

A strong breeze whips up behind me. I hear it caress the waters of the lake and rush across the grass as it rattles the trees and stirs around us. Clara’s long, dark brown hair gets caught in it, tossing around her pretty face until she pushes it back behind her ears.

Magic. She is pure magic.

“Galen, if you wanted to be with me, you would have made it clear long before now,” she says tartly.

I frown. “Excuse me?”

“You broke up with me, remember?”

I sigh. “Well, yes, but—”

“But what?” she asks, challenging me with her stare. “By all means, explain why you dumped me when I thought everything was going great.”

I can sense the frustration and bitterness in her. I know underneath it all is a deep wound—one that I made. It hasn’t healed, either. It’s been underneath her armor, bleeding this whole time.

“I had no choice,” I say, meeting her eyes. “I need you to understand that.”

“All I understand is that you rejected me,” she whispers. Her voice is so soft, there’s

no anger in it now. Only pain.

No!

“Clara, you know that I was always meant to be alpha—”

“Yes. What does that have to do with it?” The challenge is back in her tone.

“The elders and my family believed that a match with you would weaken all of us. I don’t believe that, and I never did, but I was young and stupid then—”

“What do you mean?” she asks, her eyes wide with shock. “What do you mean, weaken all of us?”

I stare at her for a moment, hoping she’ll get it on her own so I don’t have to say it out loud. The confusion on her face only grows, and I sigh with resignation, flicking my eyes away before meeting her gaze again.

“You can’t shift,” I say clearly.

She flinches, then presses her lips together. I can see her fighting tears.

No, my love, no. I’ll never let anything hurt you ever again!

“Please don’t cry,” I say, reaching across the table. She stares at my hand as if it’s a trap set with a treat she can’t resist. She’s obviously drawn to me, but fighting it.

When she reaches back and I take her hand, the relief that floods through me is so powerful, I almost collapse. All she does is put her hand on the table, but that gesture speaks volumes to me.

She wants my comfort. She still craves my touch.

I cover her hand with mine, and the magic is back as if it never left. Like sunlight in my veins, pleasure races through me, warm and thrilling, echoing through my soul.

“Clara,” I whisper, squeezing her hand gently.

She keeps looking at me, her eyes wide and glittering with tears she can’t shed. Her flippant manner when she first saw me was all a shield—I see that now. Underneath it all, she’s still in love with me. She’s still that young, carefree girl I knew so many years ago.

The girl I broke.

“We can’t do this,” she says, shaking her head, but not taking her hand from mine. “You just admitted it. The pack will never allow it.”

“I’m the alpha now,” I reply with a low growl. “They do whatever I tell them to do.”

“But I can’t shift,” she says, her eyes darting back and forth as if she’s being hunted. “The alpha’s mate has to be perfect.”

“You are perfect!”

A smile dances briefly across her lips before she shakes her head a little. “Galen, I can’t. I shouldn’t have come here at all. I really didn’t think this through.”

“Neither did I,” I admit. “Winnie set it up. She kind of dared me.”

Clara’s smile grows a little at the mention of my sister. “She’s still mischievous, then?”

“She sure is,” I reply. “She’ll be very pleased to find out I was matched with you.”

“She doesn’t care that I can’t shift?”

“Winnie has always been a rebel, you know that,” I answer, shrugging.

For a moment, it seems as if Clara relaxes completely. It’s almost as if I can see the good memories flooding through her, leaving a wide, warm smile on her face.

“You can see everyone again,” I say. “Some people have missed you, and they’ll be glad to see you.”

She jumps, yanking her hand back as her eyes widen again. “Some people?” she repeats. “And what about the rest? How much crap will I have to take from the pack?”

“That came out the wrong way,” I mutter, frustrated with myself and shaking my head. “I’m sorry. But the fact is, we were meant to be together, and I think this proves it. Just give me a chance, Clara. Just one more. That’s all I ask of you.”

She wraps her arms around herself again, staring at me evenly. I can’t read her expression, and anxiety rises in me as I wait for her reply.

She is desperate, that’s obvious. She needs help. I can’t just let her go.

“I’ll talk to you,” she finally says. “But I haven’t made up my mind. How do you feel about getting something to eat, and I’ll listen to what you have to say.”

“No problem,” I answer, standing up. “I’ll head over and grab some coffee and snacks right now. Did you have something specific in mind?”

“No,” she replies, shaking her head. “Just some coffee and donuts for now. I’ll wait here.”

“Great,” I say, relieved. “I won’t be long. Thank you, Clara.”

She gives me a steady, blank look. “Don’t thank me.”

“I really mean it, though. Thank you for coming today and sticking around this long. I just want to talk.”

“Okay,” she says, nodding. “I understand.”

I hurry over to the small cluster of shops, hoping that Clara’s favorites haven’t changed. I’m on my way back with a huge bag of donuts and two steaming hot cups of coffee when I realize the picnic table is empty.

Maybe she just took a walk or went to the bathroom.

But I know in my heart it’s a vain hope. When I turn my nose to the wind, her scent is less than a memory hanging in the air.

She’s gone.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

I can't do this!

The thought blares through my head like an alarm, getting louder with every beat of my heart. Reality bleeds away from me, leaving me stranded in a turbulent ocean of terrible memories. Galen's kind words and calm manner just seem to make it worse, as if I've stumbled into a horrible nightmare that's dressed up as my dearest dreams.

As I tear out of the parking lot, my little car's poor tires screeching in the loose gravel, I try to pull myself together. Just putting distance between myself and Galen has helped a lot, but my heart is still beating wildly up into my throat, making my vision blurry.

Get it together!

A line of traffic appears before me, and I settle in behind the next car, waiting for my chance to turn. Familiar movements soothe me, and my breathing slows down a little.

I'm okay, I'm okay, everything is okay.

Why did Iris just leave me there?

I feel horribly betrayed and set up, but how could Iris have known she was matching me with my long-lost baby daddy? She couldn't have.

Could she?

I know I'll have to call her eventually and explain all of this, but I'm in no hurry to do

it. Apparently, I've signed a binding contract, and now I'll have to navigate my way out of it.

Surely Iris will understand when I explain. This has all been just a horrible mistake. I'll find another way to help Nico.

My guts twist as I contemplate this idea. The whole reason I contacted the agency was because there were no other options to get him the help he needed. I'm worse off than when I started, and left with nowhere else to go.

I'll think of something. Anything is better than getting trapped with Galen.

As I head back into West Glacier, the traffic thins a little, and my heart finally catches up to my head.

It was so good to see him again...

Don't do this, you fool!

I can't help it. Just seeing him has brought the memories roaring back to me. All those long afternoons walking in the forest, long nights wrapped in each other's arms, the power of his touch and the heat of his kiss.

He looks the same... but so different. The features of his face have been sharpened by time, tempered by wisdom. He's even hotter now than he was before.

Heat throbs all over me, and I have to press my thighs together and swallow hard. My passion for him never wavered. Even when I was crying myself to sleep and moaning into the pillow, my body was still raging with intense arousal, a volcano of attraction I couldn't be free of, no matter how hard I tried.

As I pull into my driveway, I sit in the car for a few seconds, savoring the new images of Galen.

He looks taller somehow. And his shoulders are definitely broader. His cheekbones are more defined than they once were, and there's still that delicious curl to his lips.

I close my eyes, running my tongue across my lips to remember the taste of him. I can feel his silky blond hair running through my fingertips, and I can see the deep, glittering green in his eyes that is only visible when you're very close to him.

Nose to nose... cheek to cheek. His body pressed against mine, every hard inch of him touching me, pleasuring me, obliterating me with his strength—

Stop it!

I get out of the car, slamming the door as I stride towards the house. I can hear Galen's words in my mind, begging me to give him another chance, telling me it wasn't his fault.

But it was your fault, Galen. You betrayed me. It didn't stop me from loving you, but I have to protect my heart, and my son's.

"Hello?" I call, opening the door.

Nico and his babysitter, Gwen, are sitting on the couch watching cartoons and eating pizza. My son jumps up straight away to give me a hug.

"How was your meeting, Mommy?" he asks.

"It was fine. Nothing too stressful. I'm guessing you won't need any dinner?"

“I hope you don’t mind,” Gwen says, gesturing to the pizza. “I didn’t know how long you’d be, so I thought I’d make it a bit of a party.”

“That’s fine, hon,” I say. “Thanks for watching him. I’m good now, so you can head off.”

“Thanks,” Gwen says, grabbing her stuff and heading out the door. “Call me if you need me again.”

“Will do,” I answer, waving goodbye as I shut the door. Nico leads me over to the couch, and I sit down beside him, taking a slice of pizza.

“Did you have a good time with Gwen?” I ask him.

“Yeah, I like her much better than Mrs. Florence.”

I chuckle a little. “Mrs. Florence is eighty, and she doesn’t believe in pizza for dinner.”

“You made my point for me,” Nico says, grinning.

For a few minutes, we just watch TV and eat, but I can sense a rising energy in Nico, and my own anxiety rises in response.

Now I’m back here again, struggling with the same problem, not knowing how to help my son.

What am I going to do?

“Did you do your homework?” I ask.

Nico glances at me, a flash of fury in his eyes. “I didn’t. It’s a stupid assignment.”

“Well, it doesn’t really matter what you think about it. You need to give it a try.”

“School is boring,” he mutters. “Nothing interests me.” He sighs and groans. “I just feel like there is something else I’m supposed to be doing.”

“We talked about this, Nico,” I say, feeling irritated. “Just because school isn’t interesting, it’s no excuse to give up. If you can apply yourself, that’s all I’m asking.”

“You wouldn’t understand, Mom!” Nico says with a bit too much force. “I have so much trouble concentrating, and now I can hardly ever sleep. You don’t know what it’s like for me.”

My heart screams in my chest. The jumble of emotions inside me feels like it’s tearing me apart.

I have to help my son, but how?

Even though I can’t shift myself, I know that if a shifter is not guided through their first time, terrible things can happen. Nico could hurt others or himself. And there would be nothing I could do about it.

I have to figure this out.

A knock at the door startles me, and I jump up off the couch.

“Who do you think it could be?” Nico asks.

“Probably just Gwen,” I say. “Maybe she forgot something.”

I hurry to the door, trying to calm my teeming thoughts. I'm not paying attention at all as I open the door, and when I look up and see who it is, a wave of shock hits me so hard that I almost collapse.

Galen?!

"Clara," Galen says in a low voice. "We need to talk."

I can't move, let alone speak. My hand grips the doorknob, and it's the only thing keeping me from falling down. While I struggle to organize a coherent thought, I hear Nico's light footsteps coming up behind me.

Oh no!

Galen looks over my shoulder and sees Nico. I watch the color drain out of his face as he stares at his son, who is his spitting image. His mouth goes slack with shock, and his dark eyes glimmer with spots of vibrant green.

Those beautiful, deep eyes flicker up to my face, and I can feel the impact of this moment slamming into Galen like a freight train. He looks wounded, as if I just shot him straight through the heart.

While I'm still reeling with shock, Galen turns his gaze back to Nico, his expression an equal mixture of awe and infinite pain.

Turning slowly, I look at Nico and find him staring at Galen the exact same way. He looks so much like his father—high cheekbones, delicate mouth, broad shoulders—but his bright golden eyes are all me.

"I know you," Nico says quietly. "How do I know you?"

Galen steps forward through the open doorway. I'm still standing frozen, with my hand on the knob, paralyzed like a statue frozen in time.

Just come right in, Galen.

"I know you, too," Galen says, crouching down to look into his son's eyes. "I'm your father."

Nico's eyes widen, and his face goes white. He looks up at me, shaking his head in shock.

"It's true, Nico," I croak, my voice stuck in my throat.

"You never told me, Mom!" Nico cries. "How could you not tell me?"

"You never asked!"

"Because from the way you talked about him, I thought he must be dead!" Nico's eyes turn from mine to his father's, the amber depths burning with molten gold.

"You never came for me," Nico chokes out. "Why didn't you come for me?"

"I didn't know about you," Galen says. "I swear, I would have come if I knew."

"Why did you do this?" Nico asks me, glaring up at me.

I can't do anything except stare back at him, my fingers trembling as I try to hold on to the door. I shake my head hopelessly, holding back tears.

"Now, now, Nico—that's your name, right?" Galen asks.

“Yes,” Nico answers.

“Don’t blame your mom. She’s had a hard time raising you by herself, I’m sure, and she would have done what she thought best. I’m here now, and that’s all that matters.”

Nico looks up at me, then back at Galen. He sighs, and I watch the tension drain out of him.

“Okay... Dad. I can call you Dad, can’t I?”

“You sure can,” Galen answers, smiling. “Call me that as much as you want.”

“Cool!” Nico says, grinning. “Do you want to hang out and watch cartoons? There’s still some pizza left.”

“That sounds great!” Galen replies, taking his son’s hand and following him to the living room. I watch them go, then I realize I’m still standing in the hall with the door open. I slam it shut so I can go after the boys.

“What’s your favorite cartoon?” Galen asks. “How are you doing at school? Do you have any friends?”

“Slow down, Dad,” Nico laughs. “I can’t catch you up on seven years of news in one afternoon.”

“I suppose that’s true, but you could try.”

They laugh together, and I’m struck by the almost identical expressions of glee on their faces.

Was I wrong to keep Nico from his father?

But I thought I had no choice! Galen rejected me!

By the time I realized I was pregnant, I was already far from Quartz Key, and it seemed impossible to return. The only option I had was to raise my son alone.

After watching the boys talk for a while, I go into the kitchen and stand by the counter. I feel hollow. Numb, like I'm disconnected from the world.

I don't know what to do.

"Clara," Galen speaks behind me, his voice soft but so sudden it makes me jump with fear.

"I thought you were hanging out with Nico," I mutter, turning around.

"He was obviously getting tired, so I helped him upstairs and get him settled in for a nap. Meeting me seems to have taken it out of him."

I nod helplessly. I can't speak. I'm so full of desperation and desire I can practically feel it emanating from my skin. We stare at each other for a few seconds, and Galen's deep green eyes get colder and harder by the second.

"I'm sorry—" I blurt out, but Galen won't let me speak.

"You're sorry?" he hisses. "You think sorry is going to cut it after hiding my son from me?"

"Galen—"

“No! Clara, no. I came here to plead my case, to beg you to give this marriage a try. All I wanted was to make it up to you. But now I don’t even know what I want to say.”

“How could I tell you?” I ask, a pleading note in my voice. “Tell me, what was I supposed to do? You dumped me. By the time I knew I was pregnant, it was too late to call you, even if I wanted to!”

“I never expected you to leave town!” Galen snaps. “I did what I had to at the time. I was always going to explain myself to you and make a plan for us to be together. You’re the one who left!”

“Don’t act like you don’t know!” I cry, trying desperately to keep my voice down. “I was teased every day of my life—treated like a disease, worse than an outcast. You made me feel valued and special. When you rejected me, it didn’t just break my heart—it broke my spirit. I couldn’t stand the stares and the laughter anymore. Not without you by my side.”

Galen’s fury falters slightly, and the rage dies out of his eyes.

“Imagine if Nico was like me,” I plead with him. “Imagine he had no shifter gene. I’d just be taking my son back to the key to be ridiculed like I was, and completely rejected by his father. Would you even have claimed him as yours?”

“Of course I would have!” Galen snaps in a fervent whisper. “He’s my son—the scent is undeniable. I would have raised him proudly as my own.”

“Even after rejecting me?” I say, my voice low as my anger is replaced by a dull, permeating helplessness. “After telling me you couldn’t be with me, you want me to believe you still would have raised Nico as your own. And what if he wasn’t a shifter, Galen? What then?”

“I’d still love him just the same,” Galen states firmly.

“I guess we’ll never know,” I murmur, wiping a tear from my cheek.

Galen turns away and walks back to the living room, and I let him go. I feel completely exhausted by the conversation and can’t think of anything else to say.

“Clara!” Galen’s panicked voice cracks through me with a shock like a cutting whip.

“What is it?” I ask, hurrying out to the lounge room.

“Nico’s gone.”

“He might have just gone to the bathroom,” I say, hurrying through the house. Galen looks, too. My house isn’t that big, so seconds later, we meet again in the living room, both of us barely holding back our fear.

“I don’t think he’s here,” Galen says, confused. “Where would he go?”

I shake my head helplessly, feeling the tears start. “I don’t know!” I wail. “He’s just gone!”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

Panic floods through my bones, a cold terror like nothing I've ever known. A series of horrific images race through my mind, and a sharp pain stabs me through the chest.

Is this what it feels like to be a parent?

I never imagined the world could be so dangerous!

"Where would he go?" I ask, hoping that Clara has a mundane answer.

"I don't know," Clara wails, shaking her head. "Sometimes this happens. He's been having terrible nightmares these days, and he just runs off—"

"Nightmares?" I echo, horror dawning on me as I absorb her words.

He's approaching his first shift...

I have to find him!

"I don't know where to start," Clara says frantically. "But he usually heads towards the woods. If we go that way, it's our best chance."

"Wait," I say softly, holding up my hand. Tilting my head to the side, I close my eyes and focus on Nico's scent. It's heavy in the air, mixed with Clara's and the everyday scents of the home.

Walking slowly, I go out the front door, then close my eyes again. The scent isn't hard to track. Nico's blood calls to mine with the urgency of a siren on a speeding

ambulance.

“What is it, Galen?” Clara asks.

“I can track him,” I answer. “Follow me.”

I hear her close the door and hurry along behind me as I jog up the path. The closer to the woods we get, the stronger Nico’s scent becomes.

It’s not just that he’s near, either. He’s sweating and hot, as if he’s been running hard or has a fever.

Potentially both.

Clara stays on my heels as I enter the trees. I don’t need to focus now, as Nico’s scent is clear against the tall pines and damp soil. I track him without difficulty, and when I crest over a small rise and see him lying in a crumpled heap at the bottom of a tree, equal parts of fear and relief crash through me.

I found him!

Is he okay? Is he dead? Is he breathing?

Please, let him breathe!

Clara screams behind me, putting on a burst of speed that leaves me in the dust. I struggle to keep up as she bolts to Nico, throwing herself down on the ground in front of him and putting her hand on his cheek.

“Nico, baby, it’s Mom. Talk to me.”

Nico murmurs, but doesn't open his eyes. Sweat is pouring down his forehead. Even though he looks pale, there are bright red spots on his cheeks.

"He's burning up!" Clara cries. "We have to get him home!"

"What's happening?" I demand. "Is he sick?"

Clara turns to look at me, her eyes deeply troubled. A dull ache spreads in my chest as I realize my worst fears are true.

"He's preparing to shift," I mutter.

"That's what I thought," Clara says, her voice tight with fear. "Hey, Nico," she whispers, turning to him and stroking his cheek. "Are you okay, baby?"

Suddenly, Nico wakes up and screams. His eyes are wide, the whites of them blazing with a sickly yellow sheen. I'm so stunned, I take a step back, but Clara grabs his shoulders and shakes him, looking right into his face.

"Nico, Nico!" she shouts. "Can you hear me? Please, baby!"

Nico screams again, his pupils narrowing into points. His eyes don't move, but stay fixed straight ahead on something we can't see.

Something that isn't real.

Suddenly, Nico growls. The sound seems too deep and menacing to have come from such a small child. Clara lets go of him in a hurry, but she doesn't back away.

In a movement faster than any of us can follow, Nico gets up and runs, scrabbling around with his hands and feet, trying to run on all fours. He tears through the forest,

growling and snarling as he fights against his own body.

I chase him down—I don't know what else to do. I don't need to call on my wolf at all—Nico's movements are fast but frenzied and clumsy. I easily catch up with him and pounce, pinning him to the ground.

“Nico!” I yell, trying to get through to him. His eyes are filming over with milky white, and as he gnashes his teeth together, spit foams at the edge of his mouth.

What the fuck am I supposed to do? He's having a seizure!

Nico lunges at me, snapping, and my wolf responds. A growl rips from deep inside my chest, rumbling through my teeth and echoing around the forest. Nico goes limp under me and whimpers a little, but his eyes stay white and unfocused.

“Nico!” Clara screams, catching up to us. She throws herself down beside me and grabs Nico's hand, clinging to him.

“What did you do to him?” she screams. “What happened? Nico, wake up!”

“All I did was pin him,” I answer. “I didn't want him to keep running in that state.”

Clara pushes me out of the way, shooting me a fierce glare. As she strokes Nico's cheek and croons to him, he slowly blinks. When his eyes finally open, they are soft and honey-gold again.

“Mom?” he whispers.

Clara grabs him and clutches him to her chest, sobbing with relief. I watch them both, trying to sort through the turmoil of emotions rioting in my guts.

I've had a son for a couple of hours, and I'm already overwhelmed. How does anyone do this?

Watching Clara rock Nico and stroke his hair, I realize that I could withstand any pain if I knew that he would be okay. I suddenly feel a vulnerability I'd never imagined, but also an incredible strength that comes with it.

"It's his shifter gene," I say. "He's going through the awakening."

"I thought so," Clara answers. "But isn't the first shift always on the full moon?"

"It is," I agree. "And it's only a crescent right now. This doesn't make sense. How long has this been going on?"

"At least a month. Maybe a little longer."

I shake my head. "He should have turned by now, but it's lucky he didn't. Do you know what can happen if a wolf shifts for the first time without any guidance?"

Clara just nods, and in her gold eyes, I see a terrible despair. The lines on her face suddenly stand out to me, and I wonder how long she has gone without a decent night's sleep.

Not just sleep, but the constant worry gnawing at her day after day, thinking about Nico's suffering. I've experienced this worry for only several minutes, but this has been her whole life.

I reach out and rub her shoulder gently, trying to give her strength. She's been desperate and helpless for such a long time now, trying to cope with this alone. Even though I'm still upset she didn't tell me about Nico, I realize how incredibly difficult her struggle has been, and my heart goes out to her.

“Here,” I whisper, holding out my hands. “Give him to me.”

Clara reluctantly loosens her grip, and I gather Nico in my arms. He snuggles against my chest, and a wave of love sweeps through me, so powerful that it hurts. The way he rests his head on my chest and gently clings to me touches me deeply. He’s never met me until today, but instinctively, he knows he’s safe.

We walk home quietly, Clara following behind us. I wonder how many times this has happened, and if she’s had to carry Nico home by herself.

He’s not heavy to me, but for her, he would be. She must be exhausted. Physically and emotionally.

By the time we reach the road, the sun has sunk behind the horizon, leaving only a dull red glow against the darkening sky. The street is quiet, with only the faint sounds of families settling down for the evening accompanying the lights coming on in the houses’ front windows.

When we get back, I wait for Clara to open the door and carry Nico in behind her. She checks to see if he is asleep, then puts a finger to her lips. Nodding in agreement, I follow her to Nico’s room, where we tuck him in and tiptoe out of the room.

I take one last look at my son, making sure his breathing is slow and even and that he’s properly asleep. Satisfied that he’s truly resting, I follow Clara down to the kitchen.

When we get there, she turns on a lamp and makes coffee mechanically, collapsing at the table with her hands wrapped around the cup. I realize then that she wasn’t making coffee for me—this is her usual routine after bringing Nico home after one of these episodes, and she’s repeating it on autopilot.

I make a cup for myself and sit down in front of Clara, but she barely acknowledges me. Her eyes stare dully at the tabletop, and her face is drawn with exhaustion and worry.

“How many times has this happened?” I ask.

“Too many,” she answers, her voice rough. “All the time. I don’t know.”

My heart twists in my chest, and for the first time in my life, my eyes sting with emotion. I can’t stand the thought of Clara suffering like this, all alone with no one to turn to. She and Nico have been in terrible pain, and I could have prevented it.

But she didn’t tell me!

The angry voice rages in the back of my mind. I can’t feel guilty for something I didn’t even know about, and this logic fights the dull ache of failure settled in my guts. I wrestle with these feelings silently for a moment, trying to find a way to speak to Clara that doesn’t sound argumentative.

She didn’t tell me, but I had just broken up with her. She left the pack. If I hadn’t betrayed her, then maybe...

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out, pushing my words through the pain in my heart. “I’m so sorry you had to deal with this alone.”

She looks up at me, not raising her head, only moving her eyes. The dull, utterly exhausted look on her face only hurts me even more.

“I have to be honest, I am upset you didn’t tell me about Nico,” I admit, “but I understand why you did it. I broke your trust, and all I want to do is earn it back. I never forgot you, Clara. I always intended to come back to you and explain. I just

needed time—”

“How could I have stayed there?” she asks, her voice dull and defeated. “I suffered so badly in that town, and you were my only lifeline. Without you, there was nothing for me there.”

“I understand,” I answer. “I really do. But please, give me the chance to make it up to you. For your sake, and for Nico’s.”

She sighs. “Of course. You want to claim your son. I expected that to happen if you ever found out.”

“That’s not what this is about,” I say, my voice hardening. “I knew from the moment I came through at the lake that you were there, and I was finally going to get my chance to apologize to you. I didn’t know about Nico then, and I didn’t know about him when I tracked you to West Glacier and knocked on your door.”

She nods, considering that. “Okay,” she murmurs. “I believe you. But I still don’t trust you, Galen. I understand your need to make this right with me, and that you aren’t just doing your duty to your son. But that doesn’t heal my heart.”

“I know,” I answer, wishing I could reach out for her hand. “I promise, I will show you how sorry I am, and how much I still love you. Every single moment we shared was real—I want you to know that. They don’t have to be bad memories. I was there with you, every second. You were the only one I ever showed my true self to.”

Clara looks up at me, and I can see that I’ve struck a nerve. The pain in me escalates a little more as I think about her crying over those beautiful memories we made, cursing my name for lying to her, having my fun with her, and then discarding her.

But that’s not what happened!

I know that, but she doesn't. I had to play the dutiful alpha part to perfection so my family and pack members would leave me—and her—alone. Clara also doesn't know that breaking up with her was the kindest thing I could have done to her.

My parents and other high pack members would have made her life a living hell. It would have been worse for her than ever—they would have to destroy her and run her out of town.

Another layer of guilt sinks into my guts, making me feel physically ill.

That's just what I did to her, anyway.

I look across the table. Clara's eyes are closed, her head almost resting on her chest. She looks so broken and so beautiful, I just want to take her in my arms and sweep her up, away to a place where nothing can ever hurt her again.

"Clara?" I say softly.

She mutters under her breath and jumps a little. "Sorry, I was dozing. What did you say?"

"Nothing yet," I reply. "Did you hear what I said before?"

She nods, her face tight with strain. "I heard you. I understand where you're coming from."

"Okay," I say, sighing. "All I'm asking is that you give me a chance, because all I've wanted, more than anything, is to make up for what I did to you. But now we find ourselves in this situation where we are bound by a marriage contract, and our son needs us. Both of us."

Clara looks at me, her eyes flickering with golden fire as she considers my words.
“How did you even end up on the website?”

“I'd come out of another meeting with the elders,” I say, frowning at the memory.
“They were on my case about getting a mate... which I couldn't do.”

Because I never stopped loving you.

I pause, waiting for a reaction. But she doesn't give me one, so I just plow forward.

“Winnie signed me up as a joke. I wasn't going to do it. But when Iris sent me the contract, I just had this feeling I should sign. That it would at least shut up the elders and give me something to focus on, if I truly had lost you forever.”

Clara nods. “I understand. I felt something similar, but mostly, I just needed another wolf to help Nico.”

“You've got one.”

“I don't know, Galen—”

“Please, Clara,” I urge. “Come home with me. Come home with our son. I can help him, and he so desperately needs it.”

Her eyes flood with tears, and even though her pain cuts through me, I'm also deeply moved by her strength.

She did this all alone, and she was going to keep doing it. I can't imagine how much she's suffered.

“Okay,” she replies, wiping tears from her cheeks. “I'll come back. I'll honor the

contract. But this isn't about us—it's about helping Nico. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course," I answer, but I feel like a tremendous weight has been lifted from my shoulders.

I'll be with my son, and I'll finally have my chance to make it up to Clara. I'll respect her boundary and not ask for more.

But I will never stop showing her how much I still love her.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

The next morning, the nerves hit me hard. For the briefest of seconds, when I open my eyes, the world is fresh, clean, and new. But the moment I think of my son, last night's events come screaming back to me.

Galen is here!

I take a couple of deep breaths, wondering if he's still on the couch where I left him or if I'll have to dodge him in the kitchen or bathroom. I could cower in bed, trying to avoid the situation entirely, if it wasn't for Nico.

My baby.

I pull myself out of bed, knowing no matter how bad I feel, Nico will be worse off. The nightmares and episodes have been steadily getting more intense, and I know he'll wake up sore and hungry. And still exhausted, even if he slept all night.

Before I fully get up, I grab my phone to see that Iris has messaged back. Everything happened so fast yesterday, I didn't get a chance to talk to her. But before I went to bed, I sent her a text, asking if it was possible to break the contract now.

Hi Clara! Thanks for your message. It is possible to negotiate the contract, even though both of you have signed, but the agency has worked hard to match the two of you. So, I'd advise you to at least give it a try for a week before we start talking about any fallout that might occur from deciding to change the terms. Does that sound okay to you?

I stare at the screen for a moment, not really knowing what to think. I knew when I

signed the contract that it was binding, and that there would be some legal—and possibly financial—repercussions to breaking it. I just didn't think too hard about it at the time, and now that pen has been put to paper, it's too late to worry about it.

Especially since I said yes to Galen, I told him I would give it a try for Nico. I can't take his dad away from him now. Nico needs him.

I sigh, typing out a message. That's okay, Iris, thank you. I'll settle in a bit and then talk to you again soon. Thanks!

A few seconds later comes the reply.

Wonderful! I'll be in touch. Best of luck, Clara!

I put the phone down and head to the bathroom, checking on Nico quickly as I go down the hall. He's still asleep, but obviously restless, shivering and muttering in his sleep.

I try to put my worry aside and get ready for the day, but thoughts of Nico weigh me down, and I find it difficult to get moving. When I stagger into the kitchen to make coffee, I'm shocked to see Galen standing at the stove.

"What are you doing?" I ask nervously.

"Making some breakfast," he answers, waving the spatula. "You don't mind, do you?"

"No—" I start to reply, but Galen turns around, and I see he's wearing a frilly pink apron adorned with the words: "You're as sweet as sugar!"

He stares at me for a few seconds, spatula still held high as if it's a rapier and he's

about to engage in a duel. When he sees me gaping at the apron, he looks down and chuckles.

“Oh, right. I found this hanging on the back of the pantry door. I didn’t have any other clothes, and I didn’t want to mess up my shirt with bacon fat, so...”

“It’s fine,” I say, holding up my hand. “Don’t worry about it.”

I cross the room quickly and sit down, keeping my eyes away from Galen. It’s ridiculous, but the sight of him slaving over a hot stove wearing a frilly pink apron has done unholy things to me.

Just imagine if he was naked under it. His shoulders would be bulging over the little lace ties, and the front would barely cover his thighs. All I’d have to do is lift it an inch—

“Coffee?” Galen asks, suddenly right beside me. I almost jumped right out of my seat.

And into his lap.

“You still like it sweet and milky, don’t you?” he asks as he puts the cup down in front of me.

“Yes,” I reply, picking up the cup and taking a quick sip so he doesn’t notice me drooling.

“Good morning,” Nico greets us hesitantly from the doorway. “What’s going on?”

“I’m making breakfast, kiddo!” Galen answers. “You want a big plate of bacon and eggs?”

“I sure do, Dad!”

A slight shock runs through me as I realize I’ll have to get used to those words.

“Here you go,” Galen says, putting the plate of food down in front of Nico. “After this, I’ll get you to pack some stuff, and we’ll get going.”

“To where?” Nico asks, shoveling bacon and scrambled eggs into his mouth.

“My place, of course! We’re going back to Quartz Key.”

“We are?” Nico asks, shocked.

“Didn’t your mom tell you?” Galen cocks his head at me.

I close my eyes. “I didn’t want to... not until I was sure we were actually going.”

“But we are,” Galen says, his voice rising slightly in question.

“We are,” I agree, taking another sip of coffee.

Galen brings over a plate for me, and the boys talk excitedly while they eat. I just sit quietly, listening to the conversation going on around me.

It’s starting to hit me, really hit me, that I’m going back to Quartz Key. I thought I’d never see that place again. I never even entertained the idea of going back.

There wasn’t anything left there for me. Not without Galen.

I can still hear the ugly words being thrown at me, the frenzied whispers whenever I walked by, and the deafening silence whenever it was time to be chosen for a team. I

felt alone every day of my life, even when I was surrounded by people.

After my father died, I was raised in a foster home by a woman the town knew as Aunt Helen. She took on any orphans or abandoned children in the area. Life with her wasn't pleasant. There was no abuse, but we lived right on the poverty line, and it was hard.

Even harder for me, with no shifter gene.

The other kids adopted by Aunt Helen ran away as soon as they got their shifting powers. I was stuck there until I was eighteen.

When Galen dumped me.

Too young to be an adult, but old enough to fake it and make my own way. I had no other choice.

Nico's laughter drags me out of my dark memories. I can't help smiling as I watch my son interact with Galen.

I don't think I've ever seen him so happy.

The idea of returning to Quartz Key still unsettles me, but watching my son gives me strength. I know that I won't take any of their disrespect now. Not only have I proved my worth to myself, but I also have my son to protect. I will never let them hurt him.

I don't expect being Galen's wife to help me, either. The pack's prejudice against me was so brutal, I doubt anything could change it. There's a good chance our marriage could even make it worse.

We clean up the kitchen and get ready to leave, our suitcases packed. We assure Nico

that the rest of his things will be moved into his new home. He chooses a few of his favorite toys and books to take with him for now and is practically vibrating with excitement as we head out to Galen's car.

"You live in the mountains, don't you?" Nico asks Galen as he bounces up and down. "I can't wait to see! It's going to be awesome! No more school!"

"Well, hang on there, kiddo," Galen laughs. "There is school, but it's shifter school, so you'll be doing very different stuff than what you did here in the human world."

"I can't wait," Nico replies, his eyes shimmering. He throws his arms around Galen and hugs him tight. When Galen looks down at his son and ruffles his hair, a lump swells in my throat.

They love each other. They're so connected already!

Was I wrong to keep Nico from his father?

The next words hit me like a physical blow.

"I'm so glad you came for us, Dad," Nico whispers. "I always knew you would."

Galen looks up at me, his eyes wide. I slowly shake my head and shrug. I never told Nico anything about his father, keeping things vague and hoping Nico wouldn't ask too many questions.

"But you thought I was dead, didn't you?" Galen asks our son, leaning back and holding on to Nico's shoulders so he can look into his eyes.

"That's what I told the other kids," Nico answers, nodding. "And it's what I tried to believe. But deep down, I knew you were a shifter, like me, and you had to be alive."

And I knew that one day, you'd come for us."

My heart screams in my chest as tears sting my eyes. I turn away and get into the car, trying to get myself under control.

Galen settles Nico into the back seat and pulls out onto the road. We begin the journey with Galen answering Nico's excited questions as we drive through the forest. It doesn't take long for Nico to tire out and fall asleep, and when his bright, chattering voice finally quiets, the silence suddenly becomes oppressive.

I curl up in my seat, facing the window. At first, I just pretend to sleep, hoping to avoid conversation with Galen. But eventually, I do nap, and I don't wake until Lycan Pass dips suddenly into the valley near Quartz Lake.

I feel the shift in altitude as well as a change in air density as we drop from the range. I open my eyes in time to see the stunning view of mountains rearing up into the vibrant sky around us. The sun is setting, swallowed up by thick trees shielding the valley.

"Okay, not far now," Galen says, pulling into the main road.

The old shops and houses come into view, and my heart seems to stop in my chest.

Nothing here but bad memories.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Town hall," Galen answers. "I had to tell them I was finally bringing back my wife, and they want to meet you."

"What?" I gasp, my heart starting to pound. "Now?"

“Yes,” he affirms with a touch of regret. “Sorry, but they are eager to see that I actually have a mate and she isn’t imaginary. It’s just a quick meeting.”

My breath starts coming in short, sharp bursts. I feel like my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth, and my pounding heart is about to crack my breastbone. Gritting my teeth, I fight to regain control for Nico’s sake.

I feel even worse by the time we stop in the parking lot of the town hall. Luckily, Nico hasn’t noticed my distress, and I hold his hand as we go up the wide stone steps.

Ahead of us, Galen shoves open the double doors. He strides confidently ahead of us into the main hall, a lofty space mainly used for town meetings or celebrations.

With only seven people in it, the room looks incredibly empty, but when all of them turn and look at me at the same time, it feels like I’m walking into a court of law, where I’m about to be found guilty for a crime I didn’t commit.

“Here she is, as promised,” Galen announces, waiting for me to catch up so he can take my hand. “I told you I’d be married by the next moon, and I meant it. Are you appeased now?”

There is a challenge in his voice and an arrogance to his manner that clearly shows he doesn’t give a damn what they actually think of him. He’s the alpha, and he’ll do as he pleases, but the elders can get awfully annoying about the old traditions.

Especially his mother... who so desperately wanted grandchildren.

My hand tightens on Nico’s as I look around the room, waiting for any of them to challenge me. Jacinta, a middle-aged woman who had only just joined the council before I left, looks me up and down with a cold expression.

“Clara,” she mutters, crossing her arms across her chest. I tilt my head, staring at her, not even giving her a nod.

Delia and Nathan, a mated pair and the oldest members of the pack, stand together and glare at me. Delia whispers something to Nathan, and he whispers back with a frown on his face.

“This marriage is binding, then?” Delia asks, addressing Galen and ignoring me.

“It is,” Galen says with an inviting challenge in his tone.

A dark-haired man I recognize as Sherman stands near a table in the back. He raises a glass in a toast, though no one joins him.

“Welcome!” Sherman announces in what sounds like a mocking tone. “You’ve done a great job satisfying tradition, Alpha!”

Galen shakes his head a little, not bothering to answer. Sherman is standing with a young blond girl I don’t immediately recognize. Another elder, George, comes closer but doesn’t even greet me.

But where is...

“So this is her,” a smooth, hard voice cuts through the murmur of the others, and I hear the sharp tap of heels on polished wood. The crowd parts, and Macy Ramses strides towards us, looking even more regal and severe than I remember her.

“Mrs. Ramses,” I choke out, trying to nod respectfully.

“Hi,” Nico says to her, looking around the room in confusion. Clearly, the reason for our frosty reception in the room has gone right over his head.

“Macy,” Galen greets, nodding. “I assume you’re pleased I’ve finally upheld tradition, since you’ve been so vocal about it over the last year.”

Macy presses her lips together and glares at him, drawing herself up to her full height. Her eyes flick over to me and then to Nico.

Don’t you dare say anything about my son!

Galen and Macy glare at each other for a few moments until Macy sighs and shakes her head.

“There is an official ceremony set up for tomorrow,” Macy says. “I will speak to you beforehand.”

She turns and walks back to the others, immediately engaging George in conversation and glancing back at me. It takes a moment for me to realize we’ve been dismissed.

“Come on,” Galen says to me. “Let me get you home. We all need to rest.”

“They don’t seem too friendly,” Nico says with complete innocence.

Galen laughs. “You just wait until tomorrow, son. There’s going to be a party, and everyone will want to meet you!”

I realize Galen is artfully not mentioning “Grandma.” That is, he probably won’t until Macy deigns to introduce herself.

She probably wants a paternity test. Galen’s new wife and ex-girlfriend showing up with a kid in tow must thrill her to the bone.

On the way back to Galen’s house, we pick up some pizza, and Nico munches

through a few slices even before we get home. When we arrive, Galen shows me around, but I don't pay much attention as I get Nico ready for bed. It's not until my son is safely tucked in and Galen leads me to the master room that I realize we'll be sharing a bed.

I stand in the doorway, staring at Galen as he turns back to me.

"Did you want to shower first, or just go straight to sleep?" He asks the question in an easy tone, as if we've been married for years and this is a completely ordinary scenario.

"Galen, I'm not sharing a bed with you," I state.

"What?" he asks, frowning.

I scoff. "I don't know what kind of idea you have about this marriage, but it's all wrong. I'm not sleeping with you!"

"Clara," he says, shaking his head. "This marriage has to look real. If the council doesn't support the union, they will cause trouble for us, and I won't be able to help Nico."

"Are the elders going to knock on the window and spy on us to make sure we share a bed?" I ask pointedly.

"No," he answers. "But my mother will ask Nico. I know at the moment, she's struggling because she doesn't want to accept you. Her wolf already knows the truth—that Nico is her blood—but she needs time to think it through. She will want to be around him—a lot—and if he tells her we're sleeping in separate rooms..."

With intense anger rising in my chest, I realize he's right. Macy would love the

opportunity to try casting me out, especially if she could prove I was not devoted to Galen as a wife should be. She'd even try to use my son against me.

"I hate this, Galen!" I cry out. "This is not the deal I made."

"What's really wrong here?" he asks light-heartedly, a grin tugging at the edge of his lip. "Is it going to be too difficult for you to keep your hands off me?"

He crosses his arms across his broad chest, making his biceps bulge and strain against the shirt.

A strangled gasp escapes my lips, and I storm down the hall, throwing myself into the bathroom and locking the door behind me. I lean against it, wrapping my arms around myself as my cheeks burn with mingled arousal and frustration.

The worst part is, I can't hide from him. He doesn't need his wolf to know how much I want him... I can't even hide it from myself!

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

The next morning, I get up early, careful not to wake Clara as I get dressed. When I enter the kitchen, I find Winnie sitting at the counter, munching on pastries and flicking through her phone.

“Hey, bro!” she greets. “How’s married life?”

I sigh. “You know I hate it when you call me bro.”

“Why else do you think I do it?” she giggles. “Are you going to talk to me about your new wife or keep dodging me?”

I sigh again, sitting down at the table. “If you’re going to keep breaking into my house, you could at least make coffee.”

“Ah, dodging me, then,” she says. “For your information, I did make coffee and brought breakfast. Furthermore, it’s not breaking in if you leave the door open.”

“Are you going to make me a coffee, or do I have to get up and shove your skinny butt out of the kitchen?”

Winnie laughs again, getting to her feet and bouncing around as she makes my coffee. When she brings the cup to me, she perches on the edge of the counter instead of sitting down.

“There are several perfectly good chairs here,” I point out.

She shrugs. “Come on, bro. Tell me how your wedding night went!”

I raise an eyebrow. “Maybe if you stop calling me bro, I will.”

Before Winnie can make another annoying quip, Nico appears in the doorway. Winnie squeals and leaps towards him, wrapping her arms around his tiny frame.

“Hi, kiddo!” she chirps. “I’m your Auntie Winnie!”

When she pulls back, Nico has a tiny but warm smile on his face. “I can tell by your scent,” he says. “Like, not exactly that you’re my auntie, but that you’re like Dad and me.”

“Lots of that to get used to around here,” she comments, holding his hand and leading him to the table. “Want a chocolate glazed?”

“Sure do,” Nico answers, stuffing a donut into his mouth.

Winnie winks at me. “I bet you’re glad you went to the meeting, huh?”

“Yes,” I answer tersely, giving her a warning glare. I definitely don’t want to talk about the circumstances of the meeting in front of my son.

“Good morning,” Clara says from the doorway. “What’s all the noise?”

“Just me!” Winnie grins at her. “I brought breakfast, since the ceremony is so early.”

“What?” Clara asks, confused.

Winnie hurries to get herself a cup of coffee. “The elders are on their way,” she says. “They want the ritual done this morning because Galen has a pack meeting today.”

Clara’s eyes widen, but she doesn’t say anything. Before we can get too cozy, I hear

cars pulling up outside.

Clara groans in frustration. I know she feels rushed, but there's nothing I can do for her now. It's better for all of us if we get the ritual over and done with quickly. Neither of us would enjoy a big ceremony, anyway.

Winnie takes Nico to the garden out front while Clara and I go to the backyard to meet the others. Sherman, George, and my mother join us under a massive lodgepole pine.

I hold Clara's hands while Mother stands before us, intoning the ritual words, and we repeat the phrases that bind our spirits as well as our bodies. I can tell Mother still disapproves of us and is struggling with herself, but I know she has no doubt that Nico is my son. And her grandchild.

What if I brought back Clara alone? Would Mother have still performed the ritual?

I shake that thought out of my mind as we slip the rings on each other's fingers. Anticipation rises in me as we approach the end of the ceremony, wondering if I'll get to kiss Clara. To my dismay, Mother completely leaves that part out and closes the ritual without fanfare.

The others disperse, and Winnie heads out after them, waving goodbye to Nico as she goes. The three of us return to the kitchen to finish breakfast, Clara's anxious silence a direct contrast to Nico's breathless excitement.

He bounces around the kitchen, bubbling over with enthusiasm. When I look into his golden eyes, I can't believe I lived so many years without him.

"So, what are we going to do today, Dad?" Nico asks, finally sitting at the table.

"Now that you and Mom are married, what's next?"

“I have a council meeting today,” I answer. “So you and your mom can hang out here for a while, or go shopping. Anything you like.”

“You will have to start school soon, Nico,” Clara tells him.

“Yeah, I know,” Nico replies. “But it’s not going to be as boring as normal school, right?”

“Right,” I confirm, smiling. “You’ll have extra duties, too, as the son of the alpha.”

Nico’s eyes widen. “Like what?”

“Like learning our history, getting to know the whole pack, scouting our territory, and being able to manage people,” I explain. “You don’t need to worry about that for a while, though.”

“Good,” Nico says, nodding as he works through a croissant. “That sounds like a lot of hard work.”

Clara’s voice cuts suddenly into the conversation, almost startling me. “Nico, can you go to the living room and play some of your games, please? I left your bag in there with your tablet.”

Nico just shrugs and heads off towards the living room, waving as he goes.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Clara growls.

I frown. “Talking to my son.”

“Talking about pack responsibilities? Now? He’s only seven.”

“I didn’t mean he had to start right away,” I point out. “You know that.”

“I don’t think you realize how much of a change this is for him. Just leave out the pack stuff for now, okay?”

“Okay,” I answer, trying to keep my voice steady. I’m quickly losing track of the conversation because I’m getting too distracted watching Clara.

At first, when she was moving around the kitchen, I was struck by her natural grace, which has only grown as she matured. When she sits down next to me and fixes me with those big, honey-gold eyes, I’m plummeting down into memories, sinking into wells of sweet, delicious sensations that my body never forgot.

The taste of her lips, the feel of her in my hands...

“Galen,” Clara says sharply. “Are you listening to me?”

I snap out of it. “Yes, of course.”

“Since I’m pretty sure you missed it, I’ll say it again: I don’t want you to get any ideas while we’re sharing a bed, okay?”

“I understand,” I say. “But like I said, this has to look real—even to Nico. So, you might want to act a bit warmer toward me when we’re around him.”

Fiery lightning crackles through the gold of her eyes. She doesn’t move, but her gaze challenges me as her ire rises.

“I’m doing my best,” she finally says. “Nico seems fine. I don’t know what you’re worried about.”

“I’m not worried,” I counter. “Not yet, anyway. But my mom will want to properly meet him soon, and she will ask.”

“I don’t have to prove anything to her,” Clara says defiantly, turning her gaze from me to focus on her coffee. “The contract is binding. We share a bed. I’ve already explained myself to you, and I can’t just act like I’m fine when I’m not.”

“I’m sorry, Clara,” I whisper, meaning it with my whole heart. Seeing this beautiful woman in front of me, still delicate and fragile but now tempered into steel, makes my heart ache for who she used to be.

And throb with excitement for who she has become.

She looks towards me and blinks, long lashes falling against her cheeks for the briefest of seconds before gazing at me openly, pain shimmering in the golden depths of her eyes.

“I had better get going,” I say, standing up. “They’ll be waiting for me. Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will,” she mutters, looking away from me as she takes another sip of coffee. I wait a second longer and then go out the back door, my feelings beginning to simmer to a boil.

She was never this fiery before.

The Clara I remember was sweet and gentle, always quiet. I know she went to great efforts to stay under everyone’s radar because of the bullying, but I never imagined there was a goddess of fire underneath that shy demeanor.

And this fire in her... it fascinates me. It turns me on.

It's driving my wolf fucking crazy.

My drive to the town hall is an uncomfortable one. My body constantly reminds me of what it felt like to have Clara in my arms... and what it might feel like now that she isn't as sweet and submissive. When I finally park, I have to stay in the car for a few minutes to calm myself down.

Okay, onto the boring stuff. At least now, no one will be able to accuse me of not getting a mate.

When I come inside, I see Sherman, Jacinta, Nathan, and George gathered around a small table at the back.

Why isn't my mother here?

Ever since she had to take over from Dad, Mother has been constantly involved in pack business. It's why she performed the ceremony this morning and attends every council meeting.

"Where's my mother?" I ask as I sit down at the table.

"She said she didn't need to attend today," Sherman answers. "I think she's going to be attending a lot less now that you're married."

Of course, she would. Her only reason to attend meetings before was to harass me to get a mate!

"Fair enough," I answer. "What is the main issue for today?"

"Boundaries," George says seriously. "We need to discuss this urgently. Wolfshade extends from here all the way to Mt. Oberlin. There are multiple packs throughout the

valleys and peaks, and we're no longer sure of their territories."

"That's because we have peace," I say, trying to keep the impatience out of my tone.

"We haven't needed to run any extended patrols for years."

"Which is exactly why we should be doing it," Nathan emphasizes. "We have no idea what their intentions are."

Maybe because they don't have any?

"If we start running patrols, other packs may take it as a threat," I state. "I don't think we have cause to mobilize."

"Nobody is suggesting mobilizing," George replies. "But definitely some scouting, just to secure the boundary."

It takes a monumental effort to hold in a groan. I can't believe we are holding a meeting about this when it doesn't even need to be discussed.

We are safe. Our alliances are strong. I don't know why these guys are getting so paranoid. I should be spending today with my new wife!

Images of Clara invade my mind again, and I do absolutely nothing to stop them. Even though lying in bed next to her and not being able to touch her was pure torture, being immersed in her scent and having her so close is so thrilling.

Sitting in the kitchen with her this morning was almost surreal. I'd dreamed of her so often that finally having her in front of me was like seeing an illusion. Like a fairytale that could shatter if I uttered the wrong word.

Even when she was glaring at me and verbally kicking my ass.

“Galen?” Sherman says with a frown. “Are you with us?”

“Sure,” I answer. “I’m on board with all of this, but I don’t think we have to decide anything today.”

Sherman grins at me, obviously knowing I’m not paying attention. The others look satisfied, though, and that’s all I care about.

“I need to go out and check on my mate,” I announce, standing up. “It’s her first day back in town, and I want to be with her and my son as much as possible.”

“What a terrible thing,” Jacinta remarks, an edge of ice in her tone. “For her to keep your child from you all those years. You must be devastated, Galen.”

“She did what she had to do,” I answer, returning Jacinta’s cold tone threefold. “I respect the actions of my mate and honor her, as you should.”

Jacinta nods, turning her eyes down submissively. I can tell it’s fake, though, and I know I have to watch her closely.

I have to watch all of them.

“We’ll get some refreshments,” George says. “But there are things we aren’t done discussing.”

Holding in an exasperated sigh is too hard for me, but I manage to nod and head towards the front doors before I let it out. I bounce quickly down the front steps, checking my phone to see a text from Clara, letting me know she’s at the park with Nico.

It doesn’t take me long to reach the playground, where I see Clara standing by while

Nico plays on a swing. As I watch, he hurls himself from the seat, landing hard but running to swing up onto the monkey bars.

He's got so much energy. The next full moon will be rough.

As I approach, I see Clara turn towards the sidewalk, where someone is approaching her. At first, I'm pleased that Clara is reconnecting with an old friend, but then I realize it's Mrs. Haggerty.

George's wife. One of the oldest pack members there is. I'm sure she was never a fan of Clara.

I push that thought away. Remembering how little support Clara had makes me feel like a complete asshole.

How could I do that to her? No matter my reasons, I broke the bond of trust between us... and I don't deserve to be forgiven.

As I get closer to the women, I begin to pick up snippets of conversation.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Haggerty," Clara says calmly. "But I'm not sure what you'd like me to say?"

"Nothing," the old woman says sharply. "I'm asking you to do something—leave town."

"I'm Galen's wife now. I have no intention of going anywhere," Clara answers with an edge of hardness. She's dealing with the old woman's spite as best she can.

"You only married Galen so you could lord it over us!" Mrs. Haggerty almost spits. "You seduced him and twisted his mind! It's a horrible thing to do to such a good

man. A woman like you—”

“Why, good morning, Mrs. Haggerty,” I say smoothly. “I see you’re having a chat with my mate.”

The old woman’s face pales, but she keeps her stern expression intact. “Good morning, Galen.”

“I couldn’t help overhearing a little, and you’ve got it completely wrong, Agnes,” I say. “Clara didn’t seduce me... I seduced her.”

I see a quick flash of a smile on Clara’s face as old Mrs. Haggerty takes a step back.

“She’s such a strong, independent woman, it really wasn’t easy,” I go on. “I had to work hard to gain her attention, but I promised to make the effort every day for the rest of my life.”

I turn to Clara, reaching out to her. She leans into my side as I wrap my arm around her, and even though I can feel she’s a little stiff, I can also feel the heat of her skin through her clothes.

She isn’t just playing along for show. She wants me to touch her.

To kiss her.

I stroke Clara’s back before I pull her close, bending my mouth to hers. I intended for this to be a quick kiss, enough intimacy to show old Agnes she should back off. But as Clara’s scent engulfs me, my senses go haywire.

When I touch my mouth to hers, a shock runs through me, shivers of pleasure that caress my skin and make my blood run hot. I tighten my grip on her waist, kneading

her lips with mine, letting the tide of arousal and need carry me away.

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I'm getting carried away.

But I can't help it. Galen's hands softly stroke my back as his strong arm grips my waist, and his slick, hot lips slide against mine. Thrills run through my body, stealing my breath and making the hot place between my thighs ache.

I can barely stop myself from squirming against him as the throbbing increases in my core. My fingers tighten on his shoulders, and I don't know if I want to pull him closer or push him away.

He's an even better kisser than before.

But wait... how much practice has he had since me?

Anger flashes through me from jealousy over his past lovers, whoever they might be. The thought flees quickly, completely obliterated by the red-hot lust still raging through me.

Suddenly, Galen pulls back, and all I can see is his eyes. So big, deep, and green, they look like still forest pools, reflecting the lush beauty of the canopy above.

We stare at each other, caught in a moment of stillness that belongs to us alone, even as I hear the low murmur of people crowding around us. It's almost as if no time has passed, and we're the same two lovers who parted so long ago.

But we aren't. I've changed, and I'll never let him hurt me again.

My hands tighten on Galen's shoulders as I get ready to push him away, but before I can, a third person joins the hug.

"Clara!" Winnie says, appearing by my side to hug me with all the force in her small body. "I didn't get a chance to chat this morning with all the old fuddy-duddies around. Let's catch up!"

As she wraps her arms around me, Winnie goes up on her tip-toes to whisper in my ear.

"Don't mind that old hag! Some of us are glad to have you back."

Winnie pulls back from me and smiles, and I smile back. Even though I'm still wary, Winnie was never mean to me back in the day, and it looks like she might be the only ally in town I have right now.

But did she ever stand up for me or try to be my friend when I grew up here? No. But she is quite a bit younger than me, and it isn't likely she could have stood up for me even if she tried.

"Auntie Winnie!" Nico yells, tearing across the playground. "Hi!"

"Hi, kiddo!" she yells back, running towards him. The two collide and roll into an untidy heap on the green grass.

"We're going to have our hands full dealing with both of them," I mutter.

Galen nods solemnly. "Winnie might be well and truly out of high school, but she still acts like a kid."

I don't say anything, secretly envious of how Winnie has embraced her goofy

personality and stubbornly remained herself, even under the criticism of others. Especially her mother's, I'm sure.

The two of them finish rough-housing and run back over to us, giggling like fools. I never imagined how wonderful it would be for Nico to meet his family, and not for the first time, I feel guilty about keeping him from them.

I was so worried about what could go wrong, I couldn't see how much he needed his pack.

"Hey, bro," Winnie calls, giggling at Galen's immediate frown. "Why don't you get us some snacks while I catch up with Clara for a bit?"

"Yeah, I'm hungry," Nico chimes in. "I'll come with you."

"Okay, kiddo, let's go," Galen says, walking away with Nico slowly, throwing glances over his shoulder as if he's afraid of what we might get up to without his supervision.

Winnie leads me over to some shaded picnic tables and sits across from me, reaching out to squeeze my hand as she grins at me.

"It's so good you're back," she says. "I missed you."

I chuckle. "I think you're the only one who did."

"Look, I'd like to argue with you," she says sympathetically. "But sadly, I can't."

"I'm not exactly happy about this, Winnie. It's no fun being back in a town where everyone hates me."

Winnie sighs and looks away before bringing her eyes back to mine again. “I don’t know what it was that turned the town against you, but none of it matters now because you’re Galen’s wife. And you’re the mother of his child!”

Winnie’s eyes glitter with curiosity, and I suddenly understand the real reason for this conversation. Luckily, Galen and Nico return with milkshakes and fries, saving me from having to answer.

She wants to know how the match was made.

Quite frankly, so do I.

I don’t want to say anything in front of Nico, though, so I wait for him to go back to playing on the park equipment before I steer the conversation back around.

“So, Galen not having a mate has been a thing for a while now?” I ask.

Winnie nods, rolling her eyes. “Oh my God, yes. Mother and the other elders would not shut up about it.”

“It was that hard for Galen to find someone to date?” I reply with disbelief.

“I’m right here, you know,” Galen grumbles from beside me. “And the answer is, I didn’t have time. Dating is just so... and, well...”

“I signed him up,” Winnie reveals with a devilish grin. “I was just scrolling and saw the ad come up. I’m always teasing Galen with my little pranks, and this looked so perfect. I presented it as the solution to all his problems.”

“You’re the cause of all my problems,” Galen counters with a groan.

Winnie gives him a shove. “He only went to the first meeting because I totally dared him. He was so pissed about me filling out the forms, he wasn’t going to go. But I said he didn’t have what it takes to woo a woman anymore. It’s been so long since he went on a date!”

All of this is adding up in my mind to one conclusion. When I look up at Galen, his averted eyes seem to confirm it.

He hasn’t dated much since I left.

Maybe he hasn’t dated at all!

“Really?” I say. “How long, exactly?”

“I’m not sure,” Winnie answers thoughtfully. “But definitely no steady girlfriend.”

I can’t stop looking at Galen, and his face is open and calm.

“It’s true,” he says simply. “I haven’t dated anyone. Like I said, I’ve been too busy.”

The last sentence is hurriedly tacked on as if he’s proving a point. My mind starts bubbling with ideas—first unpleasant thoughts of him with other women, then the far more attractive prospect that he’s been completely alone and pining for me every moment we’ve been apart.

I don’t even care. He can do whatever he wants.

“How did you end up on that site?” Winnie asks me. “It’s still wild that it matched the two of you. I mean, of all the people who applied, they contracted two people who already knew each other. What are the odds?”

Winnie props her chin in her hands and stares at me with an eager grin. I realize that Galen is also watching me with great interest, but trying to hide it under a calm expression.

“Nico,” I answer quietly. “His episodes and nightmares keep getting worse, and I know he needs a shifter to help him. We didn’t have much going for us back home, and I just filled out the form without thinking too much about it. I was pretty surprised to meet Galen at the lake, though.”

“And both of you had already signed and sealed the deal,” Winnie says, still watching me keenly. “It’s like Porter’s knew you had a past.”

A tense silence falls as I wonder how much Winnie knows. Since Galen looks a bit uncomfortable as well, I’m guessing she hasn’t been told our full story.

I don’t know if I should be happy about that or not. Did he protect my privacy, or keep me a secret because he was ashamed?

“Hey, Mom!” Nico calls, approaching from the park. “There are some other kids playing soccer. Can I go and play, too?”

“I should go with you,” I answer, standing up.

“I’ll go,” Galen says, gesturing at me to sit back down. “Don’t worry, I got this.”

I sit back down, watching them go. Nico is bounding at Galen’s side, staring up at his dad with big, excited eyes. As Galen reaches down and takes Nico’s hand, I see his expression soften. The gentle smile on his face as he looks at his son makes my heart ache.

They need each other. I have to make this work for both of them.

“Okay, Clara,” Winnie says, squeezing my hand. “Now that the boys are gone, tell me everything. How did you end up with Galen’s kid?”

“Well, the answer to that should be obvious,” I say, turning back to give her a frown.

“Ha!” Winnie shakes her head, grinning. “I need details, though!”

I give her a look. “That sounds a bit creepy, Winnie.”

Winnie lets out a long, loud cackle. “You really are a firecracker. The town will have its hands full with both of us witty women.”

“Well, Mrs. Haggerty will enjoy it,” I consider with a grin.

Winnie laughs even harder. “I’m so happy to have you for my sister,” Winnie says, practically breathless with laughter. “I always wanted one, and I never imagined you’d be so much fun!”

I smile back at her, a little taken aback by the idea that I now have a sister.

I’ve got a whole family now, and so does Nico.

“Let’s dial it back again,” Winnie says, smothering her giggles. “How did you first meet? I was so young at the time, I can’t remember.”

“Me and Galen?” I say. “You don’t ‘meet’ a superstar like Galen. You stumble around in the background of his life until he accidentally runs into you.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Winnie says with a little wink. She pulls out her phone and flicks through it, turning it to show me a picture.

I lean in, examining the details. It's a graceful lily, drawn in charcoal on a poster-sized piece of paper.

"That's mine!" I exclaim. "I drew that!"

"It's hanging on his bedroom wall," Winnie says, smiling. "It's been there for years. He took it from the art exhibition without telling anyone."

I stare at the screen in disbelief for a few more seconds before I shake my head and look away. The idea of Galen knowing about my existence in the first years of school is impossible to contemplate.

"So, I'll ask again. How did you meet?" Winnie asks.

"The library," I say softly. "I used to hide out in there. I was always reading or studying something. He came by and offered to help me with a school project."

"Ooh, tell me more!" Winnie presses, grinning. "Secret love between the stacks!"

Winnie's comment is innocent, but I suddenly shy away from telling her all the details of my relationship with Galen. Even though I feel like I can trust her, there are some corners of my heart I've kept hidden for so long, it would be too painful to open them.

"No, it wasn't like that," I backpedal quickly. "We became good friends, but there was no big romance."

"Right," Winnie giggles. "No big romance, but you got pregnant?"

"Well, I never said there wasn't some... interaction," I reply, not able to stop a grin. "We were alone a lot in the empty library, and sometimes we met after school or on

weekends.”

“Sounds like a very in-depth research project,” Winnie remarks. “What details were so vital that they had to be discussed over a weekend?”

“Well, obviously, I was helping him with more than one class,” I say. “We both know Galen’s never been that bright.”

Winnie cackles with glee, clapping her hands. “I fucking love you! The next family gathering is going to be a fire. I just know it.”

“I don’t expect I’ll have this kind of wit in front of the entire Ramses family,” I say with a sad smile, losing my edge. “They’re one of the main reasons I left town, after all.”

“This is it!” Winnie squeals, tapping her knuckles on the table. “This is the juicy stuff I was after. How did you end up leaving town, pregnant with Galen’s baby?”

“I was planning on leaving, anyway,” I correct her. “I had my own plans. I’d been fooling around with Galen a little, and one night, it went too far. Neither of us was really serious about our relationship, which is good because he knew his family would never accept me.”

Winnie narrows her eyes at me as if she knows she’s getting a heavily edited version of the story. “Hmm,” she says. “Okay. So, you just left, not knowing that you were pregnant?”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “Like I said, it was just a bit of a fling. I did ask Galen if he thought of becoming more, but when he opted out, I was totally fine with that. So I went my own way and found out I was pregnant a couple of months later. Since neither of us had been that serious about the relationship, I didn’t think it was worth

tracking him down to tell him. I figured Galen wouldn't really want to be involved with a baby, anyway."

"But something is going on, isn't there?" Winnie asks, still looking at me with that eager gaze. "The matching on Porter's might have been random, but it wasn't a mistake."

"We both had needs we needed to satisfy," I answer, smiling. "It was just a very odd coincidence."

"Oh, wow, so we're back to the artful dodging, are we?" Winnie cocks an eyebrow. "It's okay. All your secrets are safe with me."

"Of course they are," I say with a sly grin. "Because I haven't told you any."

Winnie giggles. "I'm more than happy to perpetuate the story that Galen was pining over you for years, until he finally tracked you down and found you with a son he never knew he had, swept you away to marry you, and never let you go." Winnie wiggles her eyebrows suggestively, making me giggle. "No one else knows about Porter's," she adds. "Nor should they."

"No," I agree. "They shouldn't, and neither should Nico."

We sit in silence for a few seconds until Winnie shrugs.

"I like that story," she muses. "I think it will drive the town nuts. But if you don't like it, I can tell them something else."

I sigh. "I don't know. It sounds a bit corny. If I start saying it, no one will believe me."

“That’s why I’m going to do it,” Winnie says, smiling. “Coming from me, it’s a whimsical tale of romance. What do you say, Clara?”

I think for a moment about my long, lonely years by myself, struggling to raise my son and missing Galen. I also remember every smirk and nasty comment directed my way, and how much it would screw with all of them to find out they were wrong.

“You know what, Winnie? Go nuts.”

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Satisfied that Nico is happily playing with the other kids and confident enough to stay there on his own, I head back towards the park benches. I see Winnie and Clara still chatting at the picnic table. I don't know if I'm happy about that or not.

I want Clara to be accepted by my family and have friends, but she and Winnie together, thick as thieves, could be the ultimate torture for me!

Yet, though I know the two of them could find many creative ways to make my life a living hell, I can't stop grinning as I cross the park towards them. Both of them are smiling and laughing together, and Clara looks more relaxed than I've ever seen her.

"Here he is, the man of the hour," Winnie announces when she sees me approaching. "How's the kid? You didn't lose him in the woods, did you?"

"Winnie!" I groan in exasperation. I shake my head quickly in response to Clara's panicked look. "It's perfectly okay," I say. "He's playing with some of the other kids, and I think it's good for him. Other parents are watching them, and they'll call me if there are any problems. I have to go back to the council meeting. And I need you to come along, Clara."

"What?" she says with a frown. "Why?"

I sigh, shaking my head. "They just want to discuss ongoing plans for our union and how it affects the pack. I'm sorry I didn't let you know earlier, but I was hoping to get out of it."

Over the last half hour, I've gotten several texts from Sherman and George reminding

me that the meeting wasn't over when I left. I thought if I stayed away, they'd get bored and postpone, but it looks like I'm out of luck today.

And I'm pretty sure I know what they want to talk about, and why Clara has to be there.

"Far be it for me to stand in the way of boring bureaucracy," Winnie says. "That's my cue to leave. Catch up soon, Clara?"

"Sure thing," Clara says, smiling. "Can't wait."

"I'll let you know how it goes," Winnie says, giving her a wink.

Clara giggles, covering her mouth.

That is the cutest thing I've ever seen, and I've only waited seven years and two days to hear it again.

"Should I be worried?" I joke, giving Winnie a look.

"Always," she says, blowing me a kiss. "Later, bro."

I watch Winnie go, then hold out my hand to Clara. She gives me a wary look.

"We should look united and happy," I remind her gently. "We are out in public, after all."

"You're right," she concedes, taking my hand and getting up. As we start to walk across the park, she surprises me by lacing our fingers together and swinging our hands gently.

Complicated emotions rise in me, the thrill of being with her in public colliding with my shame over hiding our relationship so many years before. All I wanted was to walk proudly down the street like this, showing everyone that she was the only girl for me. But I couldn't.

I did it to protect her. I did what I had to do. Father would not have stopped—he was relentless.

We come to the stone steps in front of the town hall, and Clara looks up warily. I know how difficult this must be for her, so I give her hand a squeeze. She doesn't squeeze back, just keeps looking at the huge double doors with wide eyes.

Like a spirited horse about to shy away and bolt back to freedom.

I tighten my hand in hers possessively, feeling desperate at the thought of losing her again.

I'm worried that her nerves will make our entrance look forced, but by the time we walk into the hall, Clara is smiling warmly, a gentle smile on her face and her eyes bright. She squeezes my hand, and I look over at her in surprise.

Is this real, or is she acting? Can anyone be that good at pretending?

"Come in," George says, gesturing to the seats at the end of the table. He's sitting with Sherman and Jacinta, who's watching Clara with hard eyes.

I wonder if Agnes told her husband about the encounter at the park. The whole town is probably gossiping about it by now.

Not that I care.

“Sit down,” Sherman tells us. “Nathan and Delia are on their way.”

“So the full council, then?” I say. “What about Mother?”

“Still not attending,” George replies. “She doesn’t feel it’s necessary to be here yet, but she told me she is planning to talk to you and Clara soon, and properly meet her grandson.”

Well, there’s something to look forward to , I think sarcastically.

A few minutes later, Nathan and Delia arrive and take their seats. I’ve got a pretty good idea of what this is about. I’d rather spare Clara the discomfort of these questions, but it’s been the main reason why the council has been on my back for the past few months.

“Thank you for attending,” Jacinta says to Clara, her voice cool. “Now that you’re the alpha’s mate, you’ll be required to attend meetings fairly often and take on pack business.”

“I understand,” Clara says, keeping her voice low. She’s still holding my hand under the table, and I feel her fingers tremble.

“We all know what this is about,” Sherman says bluntly. “Let’s just cut to the chase. Galen, we need to talk about your heirs.”

Clara gasps and yanks her hand from mine. The others don’t see the movement, but they do notice her reaction.

“Do you have a problem with this subject, Clara?” Nathan asks.

Clara shakes her head as red spots appear on her cheeks.

“Good,” George says. “It’s important for the strength of the pack that we have these matters in hand. When Cliff died, it was quite a blow.”

I look away at the mention of my father. The subject is too painful to think about right now. I admired him—I loved him, even—but his rejection of Clara made it impossible for me to ever really reconcile with him.

“So, Clara,” Jacinta addresses her again, wearing a catty smile, “just how many heirs do you think you can provide for Quartz Key?”

My thoughts slide quickly to how the heirs in question would come to be. I’m suddenly immersed in a sensory memory of Clara’s naked body under me, my hands sliding over her sweat-slicked skin as she wraps her legs around me and thrusts her hips against mine. I can hear her voice calling my name and taste her breath on my lips.

“Galen?” George says, looking at me suspiciously. “Are you listening?”

“Of course,” I snap, trying to drag my mind out of the bombardment of sexual thoughts. “We’re talking about future heirs to the line of Ramses.”

“You don’t seem to be taking it very seriously,” Nathan remarks.

Oh, I’m taking it seriously, alright. In fact, you have no idea how serious this is.

My eyes slide across to Clara, who has her head down, staring at her hands in her lap. Her cheeks are getting redder, and she obviously doesn’t want to look at anyone.

Even though I’ve tried to banish the images from my mind, my body isn’t getting the message. Heat starts to build in my core, and I can feel my pants getting tighter.

I should be tired after spending the whole night lying next to her, so fucking horny, I almost couldn't breathe, so desperate to touch her. But my need for this woman is keeping me in a perpetual state of excitement.

"By all means, Clara, please tell us," Jacinta says, cutting through my mental chatter.

I suddenly notice how uncomfortable Clara is. She's not just mildly offended, but utterly mortified about trying to answer these questions.

"I wish I could give you an exact timeline," I speak for her, silencing them with my hard tone. "But you are all perfectly aware of how slowly these things develop. Even if we begin to work on this immediately, it could be a couple of years at least until we produce another heir."

I try to keep calm as I say the words, but I'm still hung up on the idea of producing another heir, right here and now.

How about right on the table? Let them watch! They might even learn something.

I can see George and Nathan getting ready to interject, so I raise my hand to silence them.

"With respect, I'm going to ask you to drop this subject now. I've answered your questions as best I can, and the point is null and void at the moment. We already have an heir of Ramses' blood, and that person is Nico."

A deep silence follows, and I notice George fidgeting uncomfortably. Finally, Jacinta is the one to break the silence.

"We have heard that Nico is unstable," she says with a cold smile. "There is no guarantee that he will develop into a suitable alpha. This is why we wanted to discuss

this matter with some urgency.”

“Unstable?” Clara repeats, her voice low but hard. “What exactly are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything,” Jacinta replies coolly. “I’m stating a fact.”

“Where exactly did you obtain these ‘facts?’” Clara asks. “You have evidence of this?”

“Do I need it?” Jacinta shoots back. “Are you going to deny it?”

Clara’s mouth sets in a hard line, and I can almost feel the waves of anger coming off her. “Nico is having some difficulties, yes, but he is anything but unstable. Now that he has the support of his father and his pack, he will overcome these challenges, just like any wolf in their first years of shifting.”

“Can you be sure of this?” George asks.

“I can be,” I cut in, giving George a hard glare. “Nico is my son, and in the couple of days we’ve been together, we’ve formed a deep bond. The boy has been without guidance for most of his life and is struggling because of it. The blame is not on him.”

“And who is to blame for that?” Jacinta asks, addressing the ceiling.

Clara’s eyes narrow, and I know she’s about to let fly.

“Me,” I emphasize. “I did not go looking for him to claim him. All blame in this situation clearly rests on me.”

“Are you admitting fault?” Sherman asks, raising an eyebrow. “That could be akin to

weakness for an alpha.”

I glare at Sherman, letting my wolf rise. A growl rises in my throat, escapes my lips, and rumbles around the room, almost shaking the walls.

“I am your alpha,” I state. “I admit fault when it comes to my son—I have failed him, and this I will repair. As your leader, I am not at fault, and when I say Nico is my heir, that is final. He is the child of my chosen mate, the firstborn of my blood. On this, my word is law.”

There is an uncomfortable shuffle around the table as the others try to avoid my alpha stare.

I had to bend to them not so long ago, but now they must obey me. And I will never let pack politics interfere in matters of the heart ever again.

“Are we done?” I say, making it clear by my tone that we are. “Excellent,” I announce, standing up and gesturing for Clara to come with me.

We leave the hall together, and I note Clara’s tight, ashen face and clenched fists. I know she’s upset, and I can’t wait to get her out of sight of the others to comfort her. Once we’re back in the park, I put my hand on her arm to stop her, trying to look into her eyes.

“Hey, it’s okay,” I say to her. “It’s all done now.”

“How dare you!” she hisses. “How dare you let Nico down like that?”

“What?” I ask, confused.

“They were saying such horrible things about him, and you practically joined in. You

called him unstable!”

“I didn’t!” I protest.

Did I?

“You might as well have! How could you do that to our son? He’s been suffering, all alone, and none of this is his fault!”

“Clara!” I yell, grabbing her upper arms and pulling her towards me. “You don’t have to tell me any of this! I was trying to defend him. I’m sorry if that’s not what it sounded like, but I’m on your side!”

She tries to pull away from me, wiping the tears streaming down her cheeks. Her brown eyes are blazing with flecks of gold, turning her into a furious force of nature.

She’s so fucking gorgeous! Does she even know what she does to me?

“Galen,” she finally murmurs, shaking her head. “I’m sorry. I was so uncomfortable in there, and when they started talking about Nico, I just kind of lost my mind.”

“It’s okay,” I answer, putting my hands gently on her shoulders. “I completely understand. But you don’t have to worry now—I’m with you. I’m standing by your side, and I will always be. With you, and with Nico.”

She looks up at me, her bottom lip trembling as the tears keep coming. “Do you promise?” she chokes out. My desperate need to protect her mingles with my growing lust. The urge to ravish her right then and there threatens to overwhelm me.

“I promise,” I whisper, tightening my grip on her shoulders.

I feel her soften under my hands, and my resolve weakens. Her scent is thick around me, muddling my mind and destroying my self-control. I can hear her heart pounding.

And sense the throbbing heat between her thighs.

She wants me, too!

I look down at her sweet, red mouth, her lips looking lush and full from arousal as well as tears. I can taste her already, and with her mouth inches from mine, I know I'm done for.

I have to have to take her. Right now.

The heat in my own body crests through me, a river of incandescent, overpowering lust. The throbbing hardness of my cock overwhelms my senses, and I grip her shoulders roughly, ready to throw her over my shoulder, drag her home, and finally have my way with her.

A thin howl snaps me out of it, a far-off sound of distress. I try to push it away, but like a splinter of ice, it invades my thoughts and slowly deadens my lust.

“What is that?” I say.

Clara has her head cocked to the side, listening carefully, but her ears aren't as good as mine. “I'm not sure,” she whispers.

Suddenly, I hear a cacophony of screams, the sounds of frightened children scattering. The cries aren't far away, just over the other side of the park.

Jesus fucking Christ, it's the soccer field!

“It’s Nico!” Clara screams, turning and bolting in the direction of the cries.

I follow hard on her heels, dreading what we are going to find when we get there.

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I can hear the screams echoing across the field, peals of terror and shock coming from the mouths of little kids. Some of it sounds like baying or howls, meaning that a few of them have shifted.

My baby's there, and he's all alone! How could I have left him?

A mother's guilt is a fierce and relentless beast. Mistakes, even the smallest kind, are unforgivable. As I get closer to the sounds, they increase, and my mind treats me to a slideshow of horrific images as I try to predict what's going on.

Galen is right beside me as we scale the small rise and run onto the field. There is a group of kids on the other side, right next to the woods, and a few other parents are charging towards the scene.

Getting closer to the group, I see some of the kids backing away, and a couple of them run towards their parents. Their scared cries and wails send panic shooting through my guts.

When we finally reach the edge of the circle, I see a dark brown wolf in the center of the crowd. He's snapping and snarling, pushing the others away from him and diving into the underbrush just outside the field to tear up rabbits.

I look around the scene in confusion. Where is Nico?

"Nico," Galen whispers, looking at the little wolf.

My heart constricts in my chest, sending pain flooding through me. It's so powerful

that my knees weaken, and I slip to the ground, my eyes locked on my son. A couple of the older kids are standing around, looking on in horror. I'm worried Nico is going to be judged for this.

I'm not even sure about shifter etiquette. How does any of this work?

Beside me, Galen strips and immediately shifts. Even though shifters rip their clothes off pretty regularly, the sight of Galen's naked body does momentarily distract me. I don't get to see much; he shifts so fast, but I can tell he's even more solid and muscular than he was before.

Galen walks slowly towards Nico, making a low whine deep in his throat. Nico turns around and snarls, teeth bared. I'm having a hard time accepting that this is my baby. With blood splattered all over his muzzle, he looks incredibly violent and frightening.

There's no way I could have dealt with this by myself.

The little wolf tenses up and bristles, fur standing up down his back as he plants his paws. Galen barks softly, cocking his head to the side. Nico yips back, confusion beginning to creep into his face.

Galen walks slowly up to him and sniffs around his ruff. Nico leans into his father, letting out a happy little sound. Galen backs up a few steps, and for a couple of minutes, they just stare at each other, communicating in a way I can't understand.

Eventually, Nico shakes himself, and as he does, the fur disappears, and he becomes his human shape. I grab his jacket off the ground and wrap it around my son, who is shivering so hard that his teeth are chattering.

"Nico! Oh my God, baby, are you okay?" I hug him tightly, squeezing him against my chest.

“I’m okay, Mom,” he says in a tiny voice. “I’m glad you came, though. I was a bit scared.”

“It’s okay, son,” Galen says. “We’ve got you. You don’t have to go through this alone.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Nico says, looking up at his father. A look passes between them, an intimacy I can almost feel.

I have to make this work—for Nico. He needs his dad so much.

“Let’s get you home,” I say, rubbing Nico’s shoulders.

Galen reaches down and picks him up, hoisting him into his arms as if he weighs nothing at all. When we get back to the car, I sit in the back with Nico while Galen drives us home.

When we arrive, I settle Nico in for a nap, then take a shower and change. I can hear Galen moving around in the house, and I appreciate that he gives me some privacy by staying out of my way.

After, I go to the kitchen and hear the water start up as Galen showers. I can’t help imagining him standing under the water, his slick, soapy hands rubbing across his tight abs and broad chest. I have to press my thighs together and hold my breath to regain control.

I busy myself making some coffee, but the whole time the shower is running, I can’t think straight. When it finally stops, I breathe a sigh of relief, hoping that my fantasies will settle down, but when Galen comes into the room wearing snug jeans and a tight T-shirt, my body starts to tingle all over again.

“Making coffee?” Galen asks, leaning on the bench. I nod stupidly, watching him reach out and smooth his damp hair with one hand. He glances over at me, and I’m sure he doesn’t realize he’s giving me a sultry, sexy look.

He looks like every poster of a male celebrity on a high school girl’s bedroom wall.

“I’ll have one,” Galen says, and even though I’m literally holding the cups, I don’t know what he’s talking about.

I’ll have you. That’s what I really want.

Galen’s phone buzzes, snapping me back to reality and saving me from embarrassing myself—or worse, doing something I’ll regret.

I can’t forget how brutally he rejected me before, after I opened my body, heart, and soul to him. I let him all the way in, and he shredded me, right to the bone. It took years to rebuild myself and learn to trust again.

I just couldn’t survive if it happened again.

“It’s Winnie,” Galen says, reading the message on his phone. “Mother has demanded our presence at dinner.”

I let out an exasperated sound. “Now? Tonight?”

“Yes. She wants us there in half an hour.”

A lump forms in my throat as I try to protest, but I know there’s nothing I can do. It was only a matter of time until Macy called on us to officially meet Nico, and we have to go.

It must have been such a shock that Galen brought me back here. I'm not surprised she needed time to process it. Hopefully, she's going to introduce herself to Nico properly this time.

I know the old wolf has never liked me, but I'm hoping she can make Nico feel welcome. He needs his family now more than ever, and having his pack around him is the only way to get him through this safely.

"We should get ready," Galen says. "Do you want to get Nico?"

I nod, silently leaving the room and going to wake my son. Nico is feeling much better after his episode and is eager to meet more of his family.

When we arrive at the Ramses estate, Nico is awed. The house is an impressive two-story building made of stone, with a wide driveway and gardens surrounded by neat rings of rocks.

"This is where Grandma lives?" Nico asks.

"Yeah, kiddo," Galen answers. "I grew up here."

"It's huge!"

Galen chuckles. "I know, but it's pretty boring. Lots of libraries and artifacts. Not much to play with."

"It's still cool," Nico says, taking my hand. "Am I going to get to meet Grandma this time?"

"Yes, you are," I answer, trying to keep my tone even. I explained to him that Grandma was the lady he saw before, but because of pack politics, it wasn't

appropriate to greet her as family at the time.

So many old traditions, and I don't even know them all. I had no shifter gene, so there was no point in learning it. I could never be part of the pack!

I've never felt even a hint of a wolf within me, but right now, there seems to be a keening deep in my soul—a desperate yearning for something I can't even define. When Galen takes my hand and squeezes it, I jump a little, but I squeeze back.

It's like he can feel it, whatever it is inside me, as if it's calling to him.

We go down the main hallway to the parlor, where I can clearly hear Winnie's voice.

"I told you, Jerry, don't try to beat me at this! I'm too good at it."

"You mean you cheat," a child's voice answers.

"That's irrelevant!"

We come through the doorway to see Winnie playing cards with a young boy. She shrieks and jumps up to hug Nico straight away.

"Hey, kiddo!" she says. "How have you been?"

"Great, Aunt Winnie," Nico answers just a bit shyly.

"Clara, this is Jerry. He's the son of Mr. and Mrs. Underwood, who take care of the property for Mom," Galen says, gesturing at the dark-haired boy.

"Nice to meet you," I tell the boy, nodding. He waves sweetly.

“I better get back to Mom,” he says. “I was just keeping Winnie occupied until you guys got here.”

“Doing a poor job of it, too,” Winnie quips. “I was painfully bored.”

“So that’s why you laughed so hard, you snorted like a pig?”

“Get out, you little swine!” Winnie laughs, holding in her guts. “I’ve had enough of your cheek.”

Jerry wisely leaves before Winnie can get out another wisecrack, and Galen lets out a low sigh.

“She’s waiting for us?” he asks Winnie.

“Still on her way down, I think.”

Then, I hear the sharp click of heels on the tiled floor. I feel like there’s a balloon caught in my chest, and I can’t breathe around it. It doesn’t even feel like my heart is beating.

I turn around slowly with Galen, clutching Nico’s hand.

Galen’s mother never liked me. Since I’ve been back, she’s barely even looked at me. How is she going to react to my son?

I don’t have any more time to think, because Macy Ramses appears in the doorway. I remember her hair being dark, but it’s gray now, still pulled into a tight, elegant twist at the back of her head. She’s wearing a fitted black blouse and a long skirt of charcoal-gray that looks perfectly tailored to her tall, slender shape.

She looks positively regal... but something has changed in her since I left.

“Good evening, Mother,” Galen says.

Winnie repeats the phrase in a slightly less reverent tone.

“Good evening,” I mumble, not knowing if I’m supposed to say “Macy” or “Mrs. Ramses,” so I just clumsily stop talking instead of finishing the sentence.

“Good evening, everyone,” she replies, a slow smile breaking across her face. “Thank you for coming. This must be my grandson, Nico.”

To my surprise, Macy bends down to look at Nico at eye level. He smiles shyly and sticks out his hand.

“Pleased to meet you,” he says politely.

“And you,” Macy answers, shaking his hand. “What fine manners you have, young man. And growing up so strong and brave. You have a fierce wolf, I’m told.”

“I... I’m not sure,” Nico says, still sounding shy. “I don’t know much about that.”

“That’s why you’re here, to learn all about your wolf side! Come on, let’s go and sit down. I’m sure Gert will have the food ready by now.”

To my surprise, Macy takes Nico’s hand, and they walk together ahead of us, Macy asking lots of questions that Nico enthusiastically answers. I glance at Galen, and he just shrugs and gives me a wink.

Nico takes a seat right next to his grandmother, and as they talk with each other, a soft light comes into her eyes, and she becomes more animated than I’ve ever seen

her.

I sit next to Nico, with Galen beside me. Winnie takes a spot on the opposite side of the table and immediately grabs a handful of blueberries from the bowl on the table and flicks one at Galen.

“Not this again,” he moans. “Last time, I was cleaning splotches off my jacket for weeks.”

“So it’s a good thing you’re wearing a black T-shirt,” Winnie giggles. “If I manage to get a good splat, it won’t even show.”

“Seriously, Winnie, must you?” Macy says in annoyance. “Can we not have one nice dinner without you acting like an utter clown?”

“Don’t challenge me like that, Mom,” Winnie warns. “I could start juggling.”

Nico laughs, trying to cover it but not succeeding. Macy smiles at him indulgently.

“Your nephew has better manners,” Macy tells Winnie. “When are you going to settle down?”

“Hopefully never,” Winnie says, laughing. “I’m not suckered into true love like my bro here,”

“Excuse me?” Galen asks indignantly. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, come on. My room wasn’t that far away from yours. I heard you playing those love songs over and over after Clara left town.”

“Winnie, stop,” Galen groans, putting his face in his hands.

“Don’t stop,” I tell Winnie. “What love songs?”

“I can’t remember exactly, but it was all swelling beats and ‘I’m gonna love you forever’ type stuff.”

“I knew it,” Nico says brightly. “Dad always loved us, he just couldn’t come because of wolf stuff. Isn’t that right, Grandma?”

The table falls silent. Macy smiles at Nico, brushing his hair from his forehead as she looks at him with her dark green eyes.

“Pack business can be complicated,” she says. “But you’re here now, and that’s all that matters.”

Nice dodge, Macy.

Even though his question wasn’t answered, Nico doesn’t seem to mind, and at that moment, Gert appears with plates of food. Nico’s sufficiently diverted, and we get away from the topic.

Macy stays fully engaged with Nico, wanting to know everything about him, and Nico glows under her attention. I’m surprised because she never approved of me, and after the way she acted when we first returned, I was worried her meeting with Nico wouldn’t go well.

Maybe she got the stick surgically removed from her butt.

“Clara,” Macy says in a warm tone. “You have done a fine job with this boy.”

I blink in surprise. “Thank you... uh...”

“You may call me Macy.”

“Thank you, Macy,” I answer, my heart pounding in my chest.

“I’m extremely proud of my grandson, but Galen, I must have a word with you about the incident.”

My heart sinks. Here we go.

“You heard about that?” Galen asks.

“It was all over town. I don’t blame the boy at all—he is going through a hard time, and he has been without support. But if it becomes widely known that you cannot manage your son, the other packs may see you as weak and create problems for us.”

“I understand, Mother,” Galen answers. “I appreciate you not laying any fault on Nico. I should have been with him, and this is all on me.”

Macy tilts her head, giving Galen a hard look. “It certainly is. Your actions leading up to this event, as well as the event itself.”

Galen looks away, and I feel a surge of concern for him.

He’s not even defending himself!

“Macy, Galen was there as quickly as he could be this afternoon,” I say. “He was attending an important meeting with me, doing his duty to the pack. We returned to Nico immediately when we heard something went wrong.”

Macy doesn’t react, except for a glimmer deep in her eyes. “Be that as it may, I want Galen to remember at all times that he is the alpha, and there has been far too much

scandal around this situation already. He needs to step carefully to see it through with grace.”

“Yes, Mother,” Galen says, not looking up.

“I hope there’s a decent dessert coming,” Winnie mutters. “I need a sugar hit to calm my nerves.”

“Me too,” Nico answers, grinning at her. Even though the situation is still tense, I’m pleased to see that Nico seems to have fallen right into place with his family.

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Dinner wraps up fairly uneventfully, with Mother charmed by her grandson and obviously seeing Clara in a whole new light. I'm touched that Clara defended me, and even more impressed that she did it in such a way that my mother wasn't offended.

After dessert, Mother decides to take Nico on a tour around the house, and Winnie gathers up the plates and cutlery to help Jerry.

"Galen," Clara says, surprising me by reaching out to hold my hand, "why didn't you defend yourself to your mother? I know you stood up for Nico, but you're the alpha now. Surely she trusts you?"

A heavy sigh eases through my chest, and it has no effect on the weight in my heart. The memories are still there, like stones dragging the joy out of my world.

"Even though she was known as a strong lady, Mother was always very passive and quiet," I explain. "She was a traditional 'good wife' to my father, which meant protecting our status and reputation, as well as keeping a beautiful home and submitting to his will."

"So that's why she was so judgmental in the past," Clara considers. "She was doing her duty to him."

"Not just that," I reply. "She genuinely thought no one in this town was good enough for me. Yes, she had an issue with you because you aren't a shifter, but she wouldn't have been happy with anyone I brought home."

Clara chuckles. "Good to know. What happened to make her so different?"

I look away from Clara and focus on the tabletop, trying to keep my expression calm.
“My father died.”

“I’m sorry, Galen.”

I shrug. “It’s okay. I mean, don’t get me wrong. I wasn’t exactly friendly with him when you left, and I might have some regrets about that, but it’s all done with now, and I can’t change it. The thing is, though, it had an extreme impact on my mother.”

“Go on,” Clara says, squeezing my hand.

“At first, she fell apart. For at least two days, she didn’t leave her room. Then she emerged and immediately started planning the funeral. She directed the pack, organized the wake and ritual ceremony to bid farewell to the old alpha, and led every pack meeting from then on.”

“She sounds incredibly strong,” Clara says.

“She is. Stronger than I ever thought she could be. She took on everything, making sure our reputation was maintained and Father’s legacy was honored.”

Clara squeezes my hand again, and when I look up at her, those beautiful gold eyes are shimmering with emotion.

“What was his legacy?” she asks.

I flinch, just a little. It’s a fair question, but it’s not a topic I enjoy, especially since it shattered my relationship with my father.

“Keeping the bloodline pure, and always marrying our own class,” I answer, my voice rough. “The iron-fist ways were handed down from father to son, generation

after generation. They maintained a system of strict laws, dictating who the alpha line could marry, as well as separating the pack into distinct classes. They also did not tolerate disagreements and dealt mercilessly with rebellion. Either in our own pack, or with our rivals.”

Clara’s eyes have gone wide, and her lip trembles slightly. I know it’s going to be hard for her to absorb these words, so I don’t say anything. I just wait to hear what she has to say.

I’m not looking forward to this. There’s a whole can of worms here that I really wasn’t ready to open yet.

Footsteps in the hall interrupt our conversation, rescuing me from the uncomfortable topic. Nico enters with Mother, holding her hand and smiling up at her.

“Did you have a good time, honey?” Clara asks Nico, getting up to hug him.

“Yeah!” he chirps happily. “I saw a suit of armor! And some cool old-fashioned weapons, and paintings—”

“Okay,” Clara laughs. “I think we should settle you down and get you home to bed.”

“I concur,” Mother says. “It’s been a long day for you, Nico. We’ll see each other again soon.”

“Bye, Grandma,” Nico says, wrapping his arms around her waist and hugging her. “I’m so happy to have met you.”

“Me too, Nico,” Mother says, stroking his hair. “Goodnight, young man. Clara, Galen, I’ll be in touch.”

Macy heads up the stairs while we get Nico into the car and start the drive home. I can't stop looking over at Clara every chance I get, and it's not just her beauty or spirit that's attracting me now.

She stood up for me. No one has ever done that for me before.

As the son of the alpha, I was expected to be bulletproof. Anything that happened at school or with the pack was on me to handle, no matter how rough it was. After Father died, the situation only got worse.

Mother worked me harder than anyone else. She didn't want me to let Father down, especially after how I ended things with him. As if making an effort after his death could impress him in the afterlife.

The ugly thoughts crowd my brain, but they don't have the same power over me that they used to. I don't feel lonely and exposed anymore, like I'm doomed to fight alone.

I finally feel like I have someone on my side.

"What are you thinking about?" Clara asks. "You're very quiet."

"Well, I'm thinking about you, actually."

"Oh," she mutters, her cheeks getting red. "What exactly are you thinking?"

"That it was very sweet of you to stand up for me," I say seriously. "My relationship with Mother hasn't been great, but after everything we've gone through, I could never speak out against her. It was nice to have someone care enough about me to defend me."

“I just wanted her to know that you’re not at fault,” Clara answers. “There’s blame all over the place here, and you’ve done wonders for Nico already.”

We pull into the driveway, and Clara gets Nico out of the car. The poor little guy is so sleepy, he can barely walk, so I pick him up and carry him inside. While he gets himself ready for bed, I join Clara in the kitchen.

“Don’t ever blame yourself,” I say, her previous words weighing heavily on me. “You had to leave, and I know it was impossible for you to come back. My parents made it hard enough on me. I wouldn’t want you to be subjected to it as well.”

“This is exactly what I’m talking about,” she says. “I’m starting to feel bad that I left you alone. I never imagined that it was so hard for you.”

“I might be starting to feel slightly inadequate,” I answer in a lighter tone. “Are you going to stand up and protect me all the time now?”

“If that’s what it takes,” she says, tilting her head. “I know what a softie you really are, underneath it all.”

Emotions stir in me, and I feel like it might be my turn to blush. Clara sees my grin and reaches up to lightly pinch my cheek.

“I’ll never let anyone hurt you,” she whispers, and her eyes darken with intensity. Something changes between us, and I can suddenly feel the heat rising from her body.

“Mom, I’m ready for bed,” Nico says from the doorway.

We break apart, a bit too suddenly. Clara goes to Nico, leading him down the hall to his room. I follow behind them, feeling excited about being so close to Clara, but rattled by the emotions raging inside me.

I don't deserve another chance with her. Any kindness from her is a gift. Don't read too much into this.

I watch Clara tuck Nico into bed, struck by the sweetness of the scene, but still tantalized by the energy that has been rising between us.

When she comes into the hall, closing the door behind her, the heat is still rising from her skin. Her scent is thick, surrounding her in waves that almost make me dizzy.

Is she aroused right now? It smells like she is...

But that's what I want to believe. I want it so much, it can't possibly be the truth.

"Galen," she whispers, stopping in front of me. I try to keep it together, but when she puts her hand on my chest, the closeness of her and her soft touch break through all my control.

"Clara," I murmur, grabbing her shoulders and kissing her. She melts into my chest, her arms going around my waist, running her fingers down my back as she squirms against me.

I push her against the wall, pinning her there as I rub my body against hers. She squirms, gasping into my mouth as my lips find hers again, and I search for her tongue with mine.

Running my hands down her arms, I grip her wrists, gently thrusting into her with my hips. I'm tempted to pin her arms over her head, tear her dress open, and feast on her breasts, but I'm still watchful for any sign that she isn't into this.

I can't hurt her again, I can't. What I did was unforgivable, and I don't deserve this—

Suddenly, Clara grabs my shoulders and lunges at me, wrapping one leg around my waist as she clings to me and kisses me even more deeply. I slide my hands down and grab her ass, lifting her and slamming her against the wall.

She gasps, moaning into my mouth as she kisses me, her hands roaming over my chest as her hips thrust against mine. I'm so hard that I can feel her rubbing against me, with nothing in the way except a zipper and the thin fabric of her panties.

I squeeze her ass hard, moaning as I thrust towards her again. She tightens her grip on me, an urgent look in her eyes.

I went too far.

"Shh," she says, putting a finger to her lips. "Don't wake Nico."

I smile as I move in slowly for another kiss, gently touching my lips to hers. I tease her, keeping just out of reach so every kiss is light and sweet. It doesn't take much of this before she wraps her hands around my neck, tightens the grip of her thighs on my waist, and presses her lips hard against mine, flicking her tongue into my mouth.

I hoist her up a bit higher, pulling us away from the wall. She weighs almost nothing in my arms as I let my hands roam up her sides, loving the feel of her legs squeezing around my waist.

Clara leans back, exposing her neck and making me slam her back against the wall. I look down, my mouth watering at the sight of her breasts crushed up against me, almost popping out from the low neckline of her dress. When she writhes and they come even closer to bursting free, I can't hold back a deep, hungry growl.

Hitching my hands under her arms, I lift her up a little so I can bend my head to her breasts, caressing the exposed tops with my tongue. She moans and digs her heels

into my lower back, leaning her head against the wall. I tug at her dress, and I can see the lace edge of her bra peeking out from the neckline.

I slide my tongue across the firm mounds, loving the taste of her sweat as I dip between her breasts. Her hands clasp the back of my head, and she thrusts her chest towards me, gasping as she writhes against the wall.

I wrap my arms around her again, and she slides down a little, her legs settling around my waist. I kiss her lips softly, gently, looking into her eyes. I feel so full of words, but I can't find my voice. The moment has moved beyond lust, and I feel so close to her right now that I don't know how to express it.

This. This is what I've missed, for so many years, I dreamed of her body, knowing she was the only one who could satisfy me.

But this is deeper. She is touching my soul.

I kiss her again softly, still looking into her eyes. Suddenly, she stiffens all over, her hands gripping my shoulders as she tries to pull away. Panic flashes in her eyes, and she wriggles against the wall, letting go of me.

"Are you okay?" I ask, worried.

She looks like she's been shot!

"Are you hurt?" I ask, desperate to help her in any way I can.

"I have to—I can't—I mean—" She backs away, her hands up as she slowly staggers down the hall. "I'm okay. Don't worry. I just have to—"

Clara shakes her head, then turns and runs, leaving me with only the scent of her on

my clothes and the taste of her lingering on my lips.

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I turn and bolt down the hall, my mind a chaotic frenzy of panic clashing against lust. I can't ignore the throbbing between my legs, the heat rushing through my belly, or my hard nipples rubbing almost painfully against my bra.

Get away! Have to get away!

Slamming through the back door, I bolt towards the woods. Even though my breath is tearing from my throat, I put on more speed, hoping the exertion will kill the longing and need pulsing inside me.

I don't know how far I run before I'm forced to stop, bending over and clinging to my knees as I sob softly, trying to ignore the primal need singing in me. The pains of running so far through the woods do nothing to diminish the ache of desire in my core and the deep throbbing between my legs.

It's been so long! I haven't let anyone touch me since... I haven't even been on a date since then, let alone made love.

Every moment of frustration that I kept hidden over the years breaks through a gate inside me, crashing through every single one of my nerves. All this time, I thought I was in control, managing my basic needs. Now I see that I was only repressing them.

Because I thought I'd never see him again. Without Galen's raw sexuality to stimulate me, it was easy to ignore those flickers of desire.

But they are no longer faint flickers of flame. My lust is a raging forest fire, and it's consuming me, obliterating sense and burning away every doubt.

But I have a good reason for that doubt. Don't forget, I gave him everything—invited him into the deepest reaches of my body—and he cast me out!

Thoughts from earlier in the night begin to intrude, hinting that maybe this wasn't easy for Galen, either. I know I've only heard the tip of the iceberg so far, and he's clearly hiding a deep mass of pain under the icy-calm exterior. I want to follow these thoughts and give in to them, but the raw, raging wound inside me screams louder than ever before.

It doesn't matter. After what we shared, I should have been his priority! How could he do that to me?

Hot tears streak down my face, and I start running again. I don't know where I'm going. All I know is I have to get away from Galen.

I'm beginning to stumble and tire when I hear footsteps behind me. I don't need to look to know that it's Galen, and he's tracking me. A soft moan escapes me as I realize I can't get away from him, and all the running hasn't dampened my desire in the slightest.

Desperately, I put on one last burst of speed, praying that he'll give up. When I hear the crash of twigs behind me as he gets closer, shivers run through my body, and it has nothing to do with fear.

As he grabs me, I feel something inside me break. His hard hands, the thrill of the chase, and years of pent-up frustration cause a tingling wave to rush through me, leaving my thighs throbbing and my nipples hard and hot.

Did I just come? It's been so long, I can't even tell.

"Clara!" Galen yells, turning me to face him. I go limp in his hands as he throws me

up against a tree, and the pressure of his hands, as well as the feeling of being pinned, makes all the fight go out of me.

“What’s wrong?” he demands. “Tell me you’re alright!”

I shake my head, so overwhelmed by my arousal, I can’t even speak. I stayed strong for so long—for Nico, but standing in front of Galen, all my walls come crashing down.

“Clara?” he whispers, leaning close to me. He looks into my eyes, gazing at me with an almost panicked intensity.

“Galen!” I cry, years’ worth of loss and longing in my voice. I hurl myself towards him and press my lips to his, grabbing his shirt and yanking on it as I writhe against him.

Galen growls, flicking his shirt off his shoulders before tackling me around the waist and pushing me back against the tree. I moan in pleasure as I run my hands over his skin, hundreds of tender memories rushing back to me as I touch him. Rocking back, I slide my hands under his arms and dig my nails gently into his shoulder blades.

He moans in response, dropping his mouth to my neck and licking his way down towards my breasts. When he grabs the neckline of my dress and rips it open, I let out a short scream that quickly turns into a wail of pleasure as he tugs my bra down and finds my nipples.

I wrap my hands around his head as he attacks my breasts with his mouth, urging him on. He pins me to the trunk of the tree with one hand and gropes me with the other, squeezing my breasts and running his hand down to grab my ass and tease my inner thighs.

My mind catches up, and I struggle in his arms. There is still so much pain in me, and I know I shouldn't do this. For a brief moment, I grip his shoulders and try to pull away, pinned by his hard body and the tree.

Galen grabs me around the waist and picks me up, throwing me onto the ground. I feel his hard hands against me as he gropes me, tearing the dress completely in half and ripping off my bra. When he falls on me, I scream and struggle, but he pins me down by the wrists and devours my breasts again.

While his hot tongue roams over my nipples and his sharp teeth gently nip my skin, I feel him shove one knee between my thighs as he settles between my legs. When he thrusts against me, a scream rips through my throat, and I struggle against him again—but now it has nothing to do with fear or resistance.

Galen's grip on my wrists tightens as he slams his hips forward, pinning me as he kisses and nips up my neck to nuzzle under my ear. I thrust against him, and if his pants weren't in the way, I know his hard, thick cock would slide right in.

I'm wetter than a waterfall right now.

Suddenly, he releases my wrists, rocking back to look at me. The ruined edges of my dress flutter against my sides, and my skin is smudged with the soft dirt of the forest floor. He kneels above me with the grace and arrogance of a god, his perfect body rippling in the pale starlight.

His eyes travel slowly down until his gaze is fixed on my pussy. He reaches out, very slowly, and rubs me through the panties. I'm so hot, wet, and throbbing that I shriek, my hips bucking wildly up and down. He rubs me again, even harder this time, and I start to whimper.

Slowly, he sinks down, not taking his eyes from my pussy. He strokes his fingers

gently across the fabric one more time, then grabs them and rips them off with one sharp twist of his fist.

When his tongue slips through my slick, wet lips to touch my throbbing clit, I scream, grabbing his head and thrusting my hips at him. Galen moans with pleasure, lapping down lower and devouring me with his lips, teeth, and tongue.

As he sinks lower, he coils his arms around my thighs and tugs me closer, pinning me to him. His tongue delves deeper inside me, and the throbbing inside me intensifies, exploding into an orgasm so powerful that my vision wavers, and I hear my own screams ringing through the forest.

“Yes,” Galen mutters. “Oh my fucking God, yes. Come for me, beautiful woman.”

I bury my hands in his hair, tugging on it and writhing against his mouth as his arms grip my thighs even more tightly. He laps against me as my pussy pulses with juice, and his eagerness makes me come even harder. When the spasms die down, I shiver under him, still feeling heat throbbing inside me.

Galen teases gently with his tongue, flicking the tip lightly along my outer lips until he gets to my clit. I feel his hands move around to squeeze my ass, and I writhe under him again, my body singing with anticipation. He uses feather-light touches of his lips to kiss my clit, making me moan and tremble.

With a groan of excitement, Galen leans forward and opens his mouth around my clit, sucking on it and lashing it with his tongue. I have to put my hands over my face as I scream and writhe, the pleasure raging through me too much to bear. The inner throbbing reaches an impossible point of pressure and seems to stay there, hovering at the edge of climax while Galen sucks and licks my clit.

When I feel his fingers teasing my pussy, my body shudders against the ground, my

senses completely overwhelmed. Galen gently fingers me, sucking on my clit at the same time, and the orgasm that crashes through me completely obliterates me, leaving me panting and shivering on the forest floor.

As I'm trying to remember who I am, Galen slowly moves from between my thighs, tasting my skin a little as he moves back up to my face. He kisses me gently, and I kiss him back, tasting the sweetness of my pleasure all over his mouth.

His eyes are so dark, they look black, with not even a shred of light to show me the green that lurks deep within. He smiles, and I feel like I should say something, but there are no words in me, only years' worth of need that I have denied with all my strength.

"Clara," he murmurs, stroking my hair. His eyes are wide with wonder as he looks at me, and his reverence makes my arousal peak again.

I grab his hips and tug on his waistband. He grins and gets up on his knees again, running his hands down his chiseled belly before slowly undoing the button.

My eyes are fixed on his hands as he slowly undoes the zipper, peeling the jeans from his hips. When his cock bursts free, I cry out with excitement, reaching for him and writhing on the ground.

Galen falls on top of me, kissing me and grinding with his hips. I wrap my arms around him and hold on tight, digging my nails as I thrust towards him. He reaches down and grabs my hips, pinning me as I open my thighs. For a moment, I feel his hot, hard cock pressed up against the throbbing lips of my pussy, then, with one hard thrust, he slides all the way in to the hilt.

Galen freezes, his cheek against mine, and his arms locked around me. I wrap my legs around him and writhe back and forth, pleasuring myself on the hard length of

him. A shudder ripples through his body, and he gasps as if he's been wounded, but I don't stop—I can't.

Lacing my hands together behind his back, I thrust upward with my hips, feeling him moving against my deepest muscles. My pussy clenches around his hard cock, sending shudders through me as another orgasm explodes inside.

Clinging to Galen, I whimper softly, all my energy spent. My pussy still throbs with need, I'm exhausted now, with nothing left to give. Galen cradles me gently in his arms, kissing my cheek softly, then my neck. He begins to move with slow, long strokes, pleasuring every inch of my pussy with his hard cock.

He keeps his slow pace, and I feel his entire body beginning to shudder with tension. His cock thickens inside me, stretching me, and I cling desperately to him as his pace increases. Soon, he's slamming me against the ground, every thrust forceful, fast, and rough.

My hands loosen on his shoulders, and my knees go weak, leaving me limp and helpless under him. A frenzy takes him over towards the end as he braces his hands against the ground and completely lets himself go, thrusting wildly until I feel his cock fill me completely before he shudders and blows deep inside me.

Galen collapses on top of me, gasping for air. I hold on to him, pressing my cheek against his, praying that my doubts will stay away so I can enjoy this moment.

If only this could be forever. Just this moment of us together, as one.

For now, this is all there is, and I give myself up to the magic of our bodies entwined, our hearts beating as one.

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It's been days since we made love, and she has barely even looked at me.

It's the only thought in my mind as I watch Clara move around the kitchen, chatting happily with Nico as she makes breakfast. He's in a good routine now at school and seems excited to get to class.

Nico looks up and smiles at me. His face is so open and trusting, it feels like it could tug my heart right out of my chest.

I don't know how I lived without him all these years. It's like I found a piece of myself I never knew was missing.

Clara leans over to talk to Nico again, and her long, dark brown hair falls over her shoulder and catches in the light. I'm mesmerized by her. Since that night in the woods, my infatuation has only gotten worse.

I thought finally quenching my thirst between her thighs would give me some relief, but I'm more frustrated now than I was before.

That night, we walked slowly back through the forest until she began to stumble with fatigue, and I scooped her into my arms. When we came inside, Clara managed to have enough energy to check on Nico to make sure he was still sleeping soundly, then we went to the bathroom to shower together.

It was almost more exciting than the sex—rubbing her gently all over under the running water, her body slippery with vanilla-scented soap. I caressed all her bruises and small grazes, whispering to her that she was the most beautiful creature in the

world and I'd never hurt her again.

Unless she begs me to.

I look away from her, focusing hard on my breakfast to take my attention away from the tightness in my pants.

I thought after that, everything would be okay. I never imagined it could make her more distant.

The morning after we had sex in the woods, we woke at the same time, and I let myself get lost in her beautiful, golden eyes. When I reached for her, she turned over and got up without even speaking to me, and it's been like that ever since.

"Can I come with you to practice?" I ask Clara and Nico.

Nico's eyes brighten, but Clara cuts in. "Thanks, but it's okay," Clara answers, her tone smooth and even. "I have some grocery shopping to do, and I'm meeting Winnie as well. I know you have a packed business day, and you'll be late if you come with us."

I want to tell her that I'm the alpha, so they can damned well wait for me if I want to be late. But I see a look in her eyes that makes me stay silent.

She's been actively avoiding being alone with me. I have to respect her wishes and stay away, even if I don't understand why.

Clara finishes getting Nico ready, then they head off to practice, as I go to the hall for a pack meeting. Everyone is assembled, even Mother, and I try to push Clara out of my mind so I can concentrate.

“I’m glad all of you could come,” Sherman says, gesturing for me to sit. “As you all know, I’ve been discussing adding more members to the council so we can have new perspectives on what the pack really needs, and how to progress in the future.”

“Cliff was firmly against this,” Mother answers. “He wanted only first families on the council as a matter of pride and tradition.”

“I completely agree,” Sherman says with sincerity. “But we have all the first families right here. Jacinta is a widow with no children. Delia and Nathan have no children, either, and no connected family who are interested in taking a seat.”

“I have two sons,” George mutters irritably.

Sherman gives him a sympathetic look. “And none of them have attended a single meeting,” he says regretfully. “Kyra is the youngest member on the council, and I was only able to convince you to let her in because of a connection to the Deakins family, who left town years ago.”

“I came home to discover my heritage,” Kyra puts in enthusiastically. “And I found a home. I’m pleased to be able to speak at council, and I agree with Sherman completely.”

I see my mother narrow her eyes at Sherman very briefly before anyone else can notice. I know she doesn’t buy the story of Kyra’s family connection and resisted adding her to the council.

“If we go on as we have, there won’t be a council,” Sherman says woefully. “We need to take action, and soon.”

“I’m not done yet, you insolent pup!” George splutters. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I am assuming that you have people in mind, Sherman?” my mother says coolly, completely ignoring George.

“It’s true I have put out feelers around town,” Sherman answers agreeably.

This time, when Mother narrows her eyes at him, she doesn’t hide it.

Then, almost as one, the entire council swivels their heads and looks at me.

Jesus fuck. They want me to make a final decision right now?

Even though this is an important topic, I can’t focus on it. My hands still ache with the need to touch Clara’s skin, and her taste lingers on my lips, tormenting me. Before I even realize what I’m doing, I stand up and turn towards the door.

“Galen!” other snaps, and I wince at her tone.

“Look,” I answer, turning back to the council, “Sherman has a point. I think we should bring in the newcomers and interview them at least. Then we can go from there.”

A babble of protest rises, and for the briefest moment, I see a sharp smile of triumph on Sherman’s face.

What the fuck was that about?

“Your father would not be happy, Galen,” my mother says firmly. “Class status used to mean something.”

“No decisions have been made yet,” I answer firmly. “I have other business to attend to, if you’ll excuse me.”

Like finding my mate and pinning her down until she writhes in my hands and begs me to fuck her.

I turn and leave the hall, so distracted by the thoughts of Clara that the meeting vanishes from my mind the second I go through the doors. I walk towards the soccer field near the school, hoping to find her there with Nico.

When I arrive, I see her in the parking lot, standing by herself next to the car.

She's gone to great effort to make sure we're never alone together—even going to bed early and getting up before me to avoid any talk before bed or first thing in the morning. This might be my chance.

She's so lost in thought, she doesn't see me approach. Just before I can call out to her, she stiffens and looks over her shoulder.

Like she knew I was coming.

How could she, though, without wolf senses?

“Hi,” I say, trying not to sound too excited. “Can I join you?”

“I'm just picking up Nico,” she says, turning away from me.

“I know,” I answer, following her. “We should go together.”

“Fine,” she answers, giving me a small smile.

I reach out and take her hand. She almost shakes me off, then remembers we're in public and leaves her fingers loosely entwined in mine.

I thought getting the chance to touch her would alleviate my stress, but instead, it feels like holding a burning-hot ember that is searing my hand and melting my bones. Shivers run up my arm, making my body tense as my focus narrows to where my skin touches hers.

When we reach the soccer field, I'm almost relieved when she lets go.

"Clara..." I say, almost reaching for her again. She turns and looks at me over her shoulder, her face guarded and her eyes low.

"Galen," she answers. "I'm sorry if you thought the other night meant something. I've been trying to show you as gently as I can that it was just sex, a moment of passion. It doesn't mean I'm going to start falling all over you like I did when we were kids."

I feel like I've taken a lance to the chest, but I swallow my pain quickly, nodding and taking a step back.

"Thanks for clarifying," I say in an even tone. "That's all I needed to hear."

She walks off ahead of me, and I can't help staring at her toned ass and the smooth curves of her hips.

I'm lucky I've had a lifetime of hiding my emotions. This one really stings, and I feel like I just got my heart ripped in two.

As we cross the field towards the small group of kids, one of the mothers breaks away and comes running towards Clara.

"Clara, I'm so sorry!" she cries.

“What is it, Annabelle?” Clara answers, her voice high.

“It’s Nico! He ran off the field mid-play, and we haven’t been able to find him.”

“What?” My voice roars out of my throat, frustration, pain, and fear all coming out in that one word.

“Alpha Galen!” Annabel stammers. “I’m sorry, it happened so quickly, none of us could stop him! The coach is tracking him right now—”

I don’t wait to hear what else she says. In two long strides, I’m halfway across the field, tearing off my clothes and shifting. Clara’s footsteps hammer behind me as I take off through the tree line and into the forest.

I can track Nico’s scent and Dennis’s, the soccer coach. I don’t have to track too far before I find him in his human shape, standing warily at a cliff edge.

“Where’s my son?” I roar, coming out of my wolf shape and landing beside him in one long leap. Dennis shivers visibly in response to the threat in my voice.

“That way,” he points across the outcrop. “It’s the edge of our territory, and I wasn’t sure if I should go ahead without your approval.”

“Track back through the woods,” I almost snarl at him. “Make sure no one else is in danger.”

He shifts and heads back in the other direction just as Clara catches up to me. I point along the ridge and shift again, running along the rocky outcrop and down into a lush valley.

As soon as I get out of the strong wind, Nico’s scent gets stronger, and it’s mingled

with the tang of fresh blood.

No! Oh, please, God, no.

I fly down the mountain as fast as my paws will carry me, thinking that I'll tear Dennis apart if anything has happened to my son. Mixed with the fear and blame is a sick, rising guilt that I can't punish anyone for this but myself.

I let him down. I knew how vulnerable he is, and I let him down.

As I get closer to the valley floor, I hear snarling and the lowing of cows. Sheep frantically bleating cut through the other sounds, and the scent of blood gets thicker in the air.

Oh no.

As I come through the trees, I see Nico in a field, locked into his wolf shape. His eyes are wide and crazed as he tears around the paddock, ripping sheep and calves to pieces.

There is already a few dead, their shredded bodies scattered around. Nico doesn't even seem to notice that he's killed them as he herds the remaining animals and keeps taking them down one by one.

This is wrong... he should have stopped after his first kill. The blood and death should have satisfied his wolf. What's wrong with him? It's like he's in a frenzy!

The last thought comes with a sharp edge of fear like nothing I've ever known.

What if he's damaged? Beyond help? What will I do, then?

I shove the terror away, running towards Nico as hard as I can. It's only a matter of time until the farmer comes to protect his stock, and he'll certainly bring a gun and shoot to kill.

I slide to a stop not far from Nico and throw my head back, letting out a loud, long howl. He turns around immediately, baring his teeth and snarling at me.

Nico, it's me! I yell telepathically, trying to reach the human side of him.

He shows no sign he heard me, just begins to stalk towards me, blood dripping from his jaws. Sick fear rises in my guts as I realize he doesn't recognize me, not as his father, nor as his alpha.

This is bad.

"Nico!" I hear Clara screaming behind me, and I realize she's followed me all the way into the valley. I leap between her and Nico, desperate to protect her.

"Let me go! He's my son!" she screams, trying to shove me out of the way.

Not right now, he's not.

"Nico!" she screams again. "Get out of my way, Galen!"

Then, Nico attacks. He leaps at us, snarling and snapping. Clara screams again as I meet Nico in mid-air, and he crashes into me, knocking all three of us to the ground. I manage to roll over Clara and spring up between them, keeping Nico away from his mother.

I rush forward, barking and snapping at him. Nico shivers and pricks up his ears, letting out a little yelp.

“Don’t hurt him!” Clara yells. “Nico!”

I’m not going to hurt him, but by God, he’s got to calm down!

Nico whines, pawing at his nose, then gets down on his belly. He flattens his ears as he looks up at me, but his eyes are still wide and unfocused.

He knows he’s outmatched, and he’s submitting, but he still doesn’t know who we are.

I stalk over to him, growling softly to keep him down. Clara rushes up beside me, and I try to stop her from touching him, but she shoves me away and wraps her arms around his neck. In my attempt to keep her back, I touch Nico at the exact same time.

There is an incredibly loud snap, and my own howl of pain rings out around the clearing as I’m thrown back. Clara hits the ground not far from me, both of us as stunned as if we got hit by a flash grenade.

“Mom?” Nico whispers.

I look up as my wolf shape fails me, draining away and leaving me bruised, battered, and very painfully human.

Nico is sitting in a small crater of blackened ground, as if lightning just struck or a meteor hit the earth right where he’s sitting. I’m still too stunned to move, and I look over at Clara, who meets my wide-eyed stare with frantic, panicked eyes.

That was magic! Witch magic!

My shock begins to give way to a deep, gnawing fear.

How does Nico have magic?

And how can I help him if I don't even know what he is?

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

I lay on the ground, the shock of the blast ringing through my bones. I try to crawl towards Nico, who is huddled in the center of the blackened crater in his human shape.

I'm so worried that I don't even think about myself. With sheer, brute strength, I manage to stumble over to him. With only the slightest hesitation, I throw my arms around him and hug him tightly to my chest.

I'm not getting electrocuted this time. That's a good sign.

Behind me, I hear Galen's footsteps as he approaches. He sounds unsteady, but I don't think either of us has been hurt.

"Nico, are you okay?" I whisper in his ear.

He nods, clinging to me. "What happened, Mom?"

"I'm not sure, sweetie. We'll figure it out, I promise."

He nods, sniffing a little. I look up to see Galen standing over us, his dark eyes simmering with turmoil.

We need help, he mouths, and I nod in agreement.

After a few more minutes, we get Nico to his feet and walk back through the woods towards home. It's a long, painful journey, and Galen has to carry Nico most of the way. When we get back, Nico is sound asleep, and I tuck him into bed.

We go into the kitchen together, and I'm so exhausted, I just collapse into a chair. Galen makes some coffee and puts a cup in front of me. When I look up, I see him watching me, an intense look in his eyes.

"What is it, Galen?" I ask.

He sighs, pressing his lips together as he shakes his head.

What's going on here? Shouldn't we be talking about how to help our son? Is he going to kick us out or something?

I don't know if I'm frightened or relieved by the idea, so I cover it with anger instead. "Speak up, Galen! What's your problem?"

"Clara," he says in a gentle tone. "Tell me about your mother."

A horrible, sharp pain lances through me, equal parts fear and indignation. There's also a deep sense of loss and longing that I know far too little about her. I don't know if I care enough to find out why she left me.

"Galen, I told you years ago I don't know anything about my mother. She left when I was young. I was raised by Dad up to about Nico's age, then when he died, I went to a foster home. None of these are fun topics for me."

"I know," he answers. "But this is serious, Clara. Nico has magic, and he sure as hell didn't get it from me."

"If it came from my mother, then surely I'd have it, too?" I snap indignantly. "What are you implying?"

"Nothing, Clara," he says, sighing. "It's just the only avenue to check. We are going

to need help, and I think that's the best place to start. Do you have any idea where your mother might be?"

I shake my head, trying to hide my feelings and failing miserably.

Galen puts a hand on my shoulder. "Come on, Clara, any clue at all?"

"Okay," I answer, wiping tears from my eyes. "I have an address for her sister. It's written on the back of one of her old pictures. But I don't know how much help it will be."

"It's a start," Galen says. "I'll need to get in touch with Kit and see if he can keep watch for me while we go and check this out. We can get Winnie and Mother to take Nico."

"You want us to leave him alone?" I gasp.

Galen nods. "We can't take him with us," he says gently. "He's like a bomb about to go off, and we have no idea when or how big the blast will be. We have to do this now, Clara."

I shake my head again, wanting to protest, but I know he is right. I can't just sit here and hope for the best, not after what we experienced today.

"Let's get some rest now and be ready to leave in the morning," Galen suggests. "Is the address far from here?"

"I'll have to find the picture and double-check," I say. "It's further down Wolfshade, I know that."

"Okay," Galen says. "I'll text Winnie and Mother to make sure they will be okay to

take Nico, and we can leave tomorrow.”

I nod miserably, hating the idea of leaving my son, especially when he’s so vulnerable, but knowing that I have no choice. I go down the hall to check on him, enchanted by his sweet, innocent expression. His eyelids flicker a little in his sleep, and I can’t stop the cold terror trickling through me.

If something happens to him, I won’t survive. I can’t stand the thought of losing him!

I go back to the bedroom quickly so I don’t wake Nico. When I get there, I find my suitcase and pull out the small stack of old photos, locating the one with the address on the back. I look at the picture for a long time, taking in my mother’s long, dark hair, elegant shape, and carefree smile.

I never knew you, Mother. But it seems you’ve laid a curse on me, and my son will be the one who pays for it.

I fall into a fitful sleep, with unsettling dreams I don’t remember well on waking. I check in on Nico immediately and find him still sleeping soundly. When I get to the kitchen, Galen is already there, making pancakes and coffee.

“How long have you been up?” I ask.

Galen shrugs. “I didn’t sleep well. Figured I’d get an early start. Mother and Winnie are on their way.”

“So soon?” I reply, taken aback.

“Yes,” he mutters, staring at the sizzling batter. “You know as well as I do that we need to get moving.”

“To where?” Nico asks, appearing in the doorway.

I run over to him and wrap him in my arms, rocking him as if he’s still a baby I can soothe with my voice and touch alone.

“Mom, where are we going?” Nico asks impatiently, pulling back a little.

I hold on to his shoulders, shaking my head a little. “We’re going for a little drive up the Range—your dad and me. To see if we can find out about your magic. You’re going to stay here with Aunt Winnie and Grandma.”

Nico looks over at his father, then back at me. “You can’t take me, can you?” he mutters. “Because... because I’m dangerous?”

“No, baby, no!” I cry, gathering him in my arms, but he pushes me away, fixing his father with a firm glare.

“Tell me the truth, Dad!” he demands.

“It’s not that you’re dangerous,” Galen says evenly, “but you have magic. It’s unpredictable, and we have no idea how to protect you, or anyone else, if it gets out of control. We can’t be out on the road when something happens. Do you understand?”

Nico nods, a determined look on his face. “I understand, Dad. Thank you.”

My eyes fill with tears again, but before I can crumble into pieces again, Macy and Winnie arrive. They promise me they’ll keep Nico safe. He seems content to stay with them, which makes our exit easier than I thought it would be.

A tense silence stretches between Galen and me as he drives up into the Range

through Lycan Pass, heading for Cyan Lock.

“He’ll be okay,” Galen says with as much sincerity as he can manage.

I scoff lightly under my breath. “Let’s just call it what it is. We don’t know anything about anybody right now, and this situation just flat-out sucks.”

“Okay, then,” Galen says with a smile. “I’m fine with that.”

I let the silence deepen for a second before I let out my other pressing thought. “I’m not crazy about seeing Kit,” I admit.

“Why?” Galen asks.

“I never trusted him. He always seemed a bit shifty to me.”

“Is that a joke?” Galen asks, grinning. “Because if it is, it’s a good one.”

I can’t help but chuckle as I realize what I just said. “Unintended, but definitely funny. Anyway, you know what I mean.”

“I do, and the Cyan pack has been allies with us for some time now. I trust Kit, and I know he’ll keep watch over the town while I’m away.”

Kit meets us outside of Cyan Lock, on the far side of Cerulean Lake, where the family has a private estate. He is polite to me, but not overly friendly, either, which doesn’t surprise me.

The two men talk briefly, and I can see that Galen is very comfortable with him, which puts my mind at ease. When Galen tells Kit how far we’re traveling, I’m very surprised when he offers us an RV.

“That’s extremely generous of you,” Galen says. “Honestly, I won’t say no. We’ll be between towns by the time we have to stop, and I wasn’t crazy about sleeping in the car.”

“Think nothing of it,” Kit says, smiling. “This estate is well-equipped, thanks to my grandfather, and I’m more than happy to lend it to you.”

“You’re already doing so much for me,” Galen says, shaking his hand. “By keeping an eye on the key for me while I’m gone.”

“My patrols will be extended into your territory, old friend,” Kit says. “I’ll check in with the council members and your family, and if anything arises, I will protect your pack as if it were my own.”

“Much appreciated,” Galen says. “I’ll return the favor anytime you need.”

“Safe travels,” Kit says, waving us off. He narrows his eyes slightly as he watches me get into the RV, but when I smile and wave, he waves back.

Maybe it’s just my imagination, but he doesn’t seem sincere.

“Everything okay?” Galen asks as we turn away from the lake and go toward Lycan Pass.

“Sure,” I mutter. “I’ve left my son alone, in a vulnerable state, and I’m going to chase down my long-lost mother to see if she knows why my child can explode like a space rocket. Everything’s just fine.”

“Clara, I already explained—”

“I know. But I still think we’re chasing a dead end.”

Galen sighs, gripping the steering wheel in frustration. “Your father was a shifter, we know that. His family line is well known to the pack. It’s a pure bloodline. So, if there is magic in Nico, it had to come from your mother.”

“And like I said,” I retort, knowing that I’m snapping but not able to stop myself. “Surely if my mother had magic, it would be in me, too?”

“I’m not an expert,” Galen acknowledges. “But so far, this is the only lead.”

I sit back in the big, comfy seat, my arms folded across my chest. I know that Galen is right, and I have no choice in this.

“Clara, are you alright?” he asks.

“No,” I admit.

“I understand,” Galen says.

“No, I don’t think you do,” I shoot back. “I never met my mother, ever. I didn’t go looking for her. She knew where I was my whole life, and she didn’t bother to come looking for me, even when my father died! Do you think I want to see this woman?”

My voice has risen to a shrill pitch, and my hands are clasped together so hard that they hurt. I make a conscious effort to calm down, focusing on my breathing and staring into my lap.

“I’m so sorry, Clara,” Galen says softly. “I really didn’t understand.”

“I don’t, either,” I answer.

He reaches over and puts his hand on mine, and his touch soothes me. Just the lightest

pressure of his fingers trailing across my skin, and my body responds, relaxing immediately as warm rivers of pleasure race through my blood.

I let myself drown in the feeling until I can feel my body responding in other ways and break the contact. I've worked hard to stay away from Galen since that night in the woods, especially to never be alone with him like this.

And look where we are. Stuck miles from anywhere, in an RV, with not a single person in sight. I don't know if I should be excited or terrified.

Why choose? I can do both.

By the time we reach the towns towards the end of Lycan Pass, the sun is sinking slowly behind the horizon, leaving long, dark shadows across the road. The sky brightens with shades of pink and orange, reflecting off the snowy peaks like a prism of rainbows.

If this trip was under different circumstances, I could be having a great time right now.

"Do you have the address?" Galen asks.

I rummage in my bag for a moment to find the photo, then direct him to the right street. Immediately, my expectations plummet. The houses in this area of town are unkempt, with long lawns and boarded-up windows. All of them have peeling paint and piles of trash in the corners of their yards.

"I don't think we're going to find anything here," I mutter.

Galen shakes his head. "All we can do is ask. We didn't come all this way to give up now. Is this the house?"

“Yeah,” I answer, checking the number. “It’s the right address, anyway.”

Galen parks the RV, and we walk up the narrow concrete pathway, dodging the long weeds and thorns that are swiftly taking over the house and the surrounds. The building has ivy crawling all over it, the green shoots wrapped across the windows as if they are looking for a way in.

“She ain’t there!” a voice yells.

The sound shocks me so much, I actually jump, crashing into Galen. He grabs my shoulders and moves me behind him protectively as we turn towards the voice.

“Excuse me?” Galen asks, taking a few steps across the porch.

“I said, she ain’t there. Ain’t nobody been there for years.”

I follow Galen across the porch, finally seeing a small, hunched-over old woman on the opposite side of the fence.

“Do you know her?” I ask eagerly, in spite of myself.

I never wanted to meet my mother, but now that I’m here, I can’t help hoping that she’s here, too, and can answer all my questions.

Maybe she really does love me. Maybe she always did, but couldn’t come to me.

“Who ya lookin’ for?” the old woman growls.

“Lily,” I answer. “Lily Clarke?”

“Lily Clarke, hey? Not too many people be lookin’ for her.”

“Isn’t this her sister’s house? Faye’s?”

“Yeah, that’s Faye’s house, alright,” the old woman answers.

“Do you know how to get in touch with her?” Galen cuts in, clearly exasperated.

“Faye, maybe. She’ll be around, I’m sure. But Lily? Ain’t no way, no how.”

“Why?” Galen demands. “Where is she?”

The old woman cackles. “Don’t be in such a rush, old boy. She ain’t goin’ nowhere. Lily Clarke’s in old Oakpoint Cemetery.”

An icy hand grips my heart as I finally realize I’m too late. My questions will never be answered.

The old woman glares right at Galen as if he’s incredibly stupid and she wants to smack the words right into his head.

“In case ya aren’t getting my meaning, son, I’ll state it plain. Lily Clarke ain’t here, boy. She’s dead.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

The sun is well behind the horizon when we arrive at the cemetery, with only a low violet light across the mountains as the stars begin to flicker to life across the sky. A cold wind whips up and whirls towards us as we head through the huge wrought-iron gates, almost as if it's trying to stop us.

Clara walks ahead of me, her purposeful stride pushing through the long grass and weeds that threaten to overtake the path. It's obvious that in this town, no one tends to the dead.

We turn down a narrow path to the south end, where the old woman told us to go. A shimmer of white glows in the darkness, and I see a tall woman standing over a grave with her face turned down. For a brief moment, I wonder if I'm seeing ghosts, but then I catch her scent.

Definitely real... and definitely related to Clara.

As we approach, the woman doesn't look up, and we stop awkwardly beside her. I turn to look at the headstone and see the name we came to find.

"Lily Clarke, beloved sister, blood of the earth, servant of the light"

I have no idea what the words mean, and I can tell from Clara's expression she feels the same. We stand next to the woman for a few minutes, until the silence stretches beyond awkward and becomes creepy.

"You came," the woman says with such finality, it's as if she's handing down a death sentence. "She said you never would. That you were cursed, like her."

Clara inhales sharply, her face going white with fear. I stand in front of her and square up to the woman, daring her to face me.

“Faye?” I ask in a commanding tone. “Are you Faye Clarke?”

“I am,” she answers, finally turning around and pulling the hood down to her shoulders. I’m shocked by her pale, gold eyes that shimmer even in the dark.

So much like Clara’s... but slightly yellow, as if the softness in her is tainted with cruelty.

She smiles as if she just heard my thoughts and looks over my shoulder at Clara.

“Maybe she’s been in the ground long enough that the breach between you broke,” Faye says. “She said you’d never be close to anyone... especially her.”

Clara chokes out a small sound like a sob. My protective instincts kick in, making me take a menacing step forward.

“You sound like you know an awful lot about my wife,” I growl. “Do you care to share it with us, or should I take her away from here right now?”

She cackles, the sound getting tangled in the wind until it sounds like all the gravestones are laughing. I suddenly realize Faye could be completely out of her mind, and therefore useless to us.

“Oh, calm yourself, you big scary wolf,” she says in a singsong tone, as if she’s talking to a puppy. “No harm will come to her from my hand, but I can’t promise my words won’t cut.”

“Tell me!” Clara demands, pushing past me. “Tell me what happened to her!”

Faye sighs, the sound blending with the wind. I get an eerie feeling again, and if I couldn't hear the woman's heartbeat and smell her blood, I'd be sure she was an apparition.

"Dane came through here when Lily was so young. She enchanted him, and they shared a wild kind of love. He begged her to return with him, but she wouldn't leave the coven. It broke her heart, you see. She was never the same after that."

I feel Clara tense up beside me at the mention of her father, but she doesn't speak. When she fumbles for my hand, I wrap my fingers around hers and squeeze gently, hoping to give her strength.

"The coven wanted her to have the baby here, to make the baby a witch. Already, we could tell she was no shifter. But Lily was afraid—afraid of the loneliness in her own soul. Whether she meant it or not, I don't know, but she begged the gods to make her daughter normal and spare her the curse of becoming an outcast. She was hated here in this town for her powers and her beauty, with only the coven to love her and accept her as she was."

Clara squeezes my hand hard, and I know these words are wounding her just as Faye warned.

"She birthed you in secret, so the coven could not take you, and went out to find your father. She left you with him and came back to her people, but they were all fashioned of the same ilk as her. I didn't know it, but they had all pledged to die, and they went through with it not long after Lily returned."

"Jesus Christ!" I sputter, mortified. For the first time in my life, my words aren't in vain. I'm invoking him in prayer.

"Yes... They all died," Faye says. "I came too late. I heard that Dane followed her

into the shades not long after. She was tied to him, and I'm not surprised she pulled him in with her."

Tears flow unchecked down Clara's cheeks as she begins to sob. "They found him drowned in a small pool on the night of a full moon." Clara's voice trembles as the words come through her shuddering sobs.

"As it had to be," Faye says harshly. "Poor baby Clara, alone in the world, cursed to be alone, always apart, painfully dull and powerless. Her fears for your future cursed you to damnation."

"Listen here," I say sternly. "Stop this nonsense. You're acting like Clara's fate is sealed, and I can tell you it's not."

"My son," Clara begs, reaching for Faye. "My son has magic. Wild magic, and I can't help him. I don't know what to do!"

Faye sighs, shaking her head. "Unfortunate. The child has inherited the shifter gene as well as our magic. What was denied to you has bloomed in him threefold."

"You have to help me!" Clara moans, clinging to Faye's hand. "I can't bear for him to get hurt!"

Faye stares at her for a few moments, tilting her head like a bird spying on prey. "The only thing for the boy to learn is trust in himself. If he has fear, then his power could melt him from the inside out. As with all those who have power, he must embrace it. When it comes to his wolf, though, I cannot say. This complicates things, as I've never known anyone to have both powers."

"I will teach him," I say determinedly. "I will protect him!"

Faye just chuckles, brushing Clara's hand away. "I must go now, away from the dead—lest I become one of them. They call to me too strongly. Seek no more here, Clara, for there is nothing else to tell."

She walks away, the fluttering white of her robes winking in and out of the shadows until she disappears.

Clara turns towards the headstone and stares at it, tears trickling down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry," I say, putting my arms around her. "It was a terrible thing your mother did to you."

"No, Galen, you don't understand," she moans. "I can't blame her for it—I can't blame her at all! If she suffered half as badly as I did, then I know why she did it. She was trying to protect me, and she had to stay loyal to the coven because they were the only ones she could turn to!"

Protests rise in my mind, but voicing them won't help. So I just hold her, waiting for the torrent of emotions to slow.

"I had no one to turn to!" she hisses. "No one! My mother had something I never did: a family!"

Clara shoves me away almost violently. Her eyes flare with rage, and for a moment, they look as cold and hard as Faye's.

"Clara—"

"No, Galen. You rejected me! I had been an outcast my whole life, used to being in the shadows, but then you noticed me. It was like my entire world lit up with beauty and warmth. I felt so safe, so accepted, that I opened my body and soul to you. I did

things I never thought I'd do—”

Her voice cuts off as she chokes on a sob. My cheeks burn with shame as I remember some of those wild, passionate nights, how far we went in our lust. Even though I'm ashamed of what I took from her, my wolf reacts to the raw, primal lust of it. My body hardens, and my hands twitch, desperate to feel her again.

“And then you took it, Galen!” she wails. “You took everything I had to give, and you left me with nothing!”

Her voice is thick with tears, and even though my arousal doesn't die, the flames of it are quieted by her sorrow, and my protective urge overcomes my desire.

“Clara,” I say, swallowing hard. “I need to tell you something.”

“What can you possibly say?” she answers, shaking her head. “You can't fix this.”

“No, I can't,” I reply. “But I can tell you why I did what I did.”

She looks up at me warily, as if she thinks it might be a trick. The words are heavy in my heart, like stones I have to force through my mouth.

“My father found out about us,” I begin, my voice harsh with old anger and fresh shame. “He pushed me one night, asking why I didn't court any of the daughters in the higher-class families. He wanted to know where I was going every day. We were in the process of him stepping down and me taking my place as alpha, and he wanted to make sure I made the right choice for my mate.”

Clara wraps her arms around herself, listening closely. Her face is drawn, but I can see her anger fading.

“After dinner one night, I was getting ready to leave—to see you,” I continue. “He started grilling me about where I was going, and I dodged him as best I could until he finally exploded at me, and I went after him in return. I told him about you, that I was going to marry you, and there was no one else in the world for me.”

I can see fresh pain on her face, but I can’t stop now. The words that I couldn’t bear to say have broken down the floodgate, and my tale is desperate to be told.

“He went very quiet, and I knew things were about to get really bad,” I say. “He told me that if I saw you again, he would personally destroy you and make your life a living hell. He said if we tried to be together, he’d dig into your past, slander your father’s name, and leave you without any standing in the pack. He’d turn everyone against you, until even I didn’t want to stand by your side.”

Clara cocks her head a little, narrowing her eyes. “Was that a possibility?” she asks.

I shake my head violently. “Never! But he said if I tried to run away with you, he’d chase us. He’d hurt you to punish me. He told me to break it off with you immediately, or he would make all his threats come true.”

“And you did,” she whispers. “You went and broke up with me on that very night.”

“I did,” I say, my voice firm and strong. “I shouldn’t have done it... I shouldn’t have caved in to him. Especially since I knew that soon, I’d have control of the council, even of the higher families, and no one—not even my own father—would be able to stand against me. I always planned to come back to you and tell you the truth, but the next day, you were already gone.”

“I left immediately,” she remembers. “After you left, I cried until I thought my chest would crack. Then I gathered my things and took my foster mother’s car.”

“The next morning, when I realized you were gone, I thought Father did it,” I remember, my chest tightening with rage. “He didn’t confirm or deny my suspicions, so I blamed him completely, almost as much as I blamed myself. I fought with him, brutally, and refused to speak to him after that. Within just a few weeks, he was dead, I was the alpha, and I had no idea where you had gone.”

Clara looks at me with a steady gaze, her bottom lip trembling. “How did he die?” she asks. “Even though you hated him, it must have been hard, especially under those circumstances.”

“I loved him,” I answer truthfully, running a hand through my hair. “And I hated him. We don’t know exactly how he died. He was found in the woods, torn up as if he’d been fighting. There was an investigation, but we never discovered who did it.”

All is silent for a moment. “Galen,” Clara says softly.

For a moment, I’m afraid that she’s going to push me away, call me a coward, and tell me I’m not worthy of her.

It’s exactly what I deserve.

Then she opens her arms and beckons to me, and the surge of joy that floods through me almost knocks me off my feet. She sobs as I pull her against my chest, linking her hands behind my back and squeezing me as hard as she can.

“Oh, Galen,” she murmurs. “I’m sorry.”

Pain lances through me, and I pull back to touch her cheek, shaking my head. “No, Clara, no! Don’t you ever apologize to me! I am in the wrong here. I should never have hurt you like that, for any reason. I also can’t forgive myself for not searching for you when I found out you were gone. My heart was broken, and I believed that

you never wanted to see me again. I wasn't worthy of you."

And I'm not. Even now.

"Galen," she says, stroking my cheek. "I understand. I do. I don't know where we go from here, but thank you for telling me all of this. We both have terrible wounds that need to heal before either of us understands what we want."

I fight the urge to shake my head. I know what I want.

I cradle her in my arms, reveling in the soft feel of her skin and her thick, sweet scent. Even though my mouth waters and my body hardens, I make no move to turn the hug into something more. She owes me nothing, but I owe her the world.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

Stumbling back towards the RV, I feel shaky and numb at the same time, like I've just survived an explosion.

I'm still alive, but I've lost everything I ever knew—and it might be a good thing.

“Are you okay, Clara?” Galen asks, putting a hand against my lower back.

I murmur a small response, not really able to answer the question.

He guides me down the cemetery path, back through the iron gates and out to the street where we parked the RV. I'm shaking even worse by the time I get there, as if I'm trying to reenter the world of the living after spending a night on the far shores of the river Styx.

“Clara, you're scaring me. Please tell me you're okay.” Galen's voice is soft and gentle, but with urgency behind it.

I clumsily reach for his hand and give it a squeeze. “I'm okay. I mean, I'm not really, but I just need a minute.”

He nods as I let go of his hand and lean on the side of the RV. After a few deep breaths, my hands stop trembling, and the tightness slowly eases out of my chest.

Remember why you're here. The one thing you still have in this world after all this mess.

Nico.

“Galen, where’s your phone?” I ask suddenly. “I need to talk to Nico.”

“Of course,” he says, handing it to me. His green eyes are dark, much darker than usual, and I can see the anxiety on his face.

He really is worried about me. I’m scared to trust him, but maybe everything he told me is true... and he never stopped loving me.

I push that thought away and quickly tap out Winnie’s number. She answers right away, and her voice is high and bouncy, a sharp contrast to my mood.

“Hey, Galen!” she says.

“Actually, it’s me,” I reply. “How’s Nico?”

“He’s great! Here, kiddo, do you want to talk to your mom?”

I hear Nico eagerly say yes and a faint crackle as the phone changes hands.

“Mom!”

“Hi, little man,” I reply with a smile, relief rushing through my chest. “How have you been?”

“Great! I helped Winnie in the kitchen to make biscuits, then Jerry took me out to play ball in the gardens. Grandma showed me some really boring old books, and now Winnie and I are playing ping pong in the games room.”

“That’s great, honey. You’re feeling okay?”

“Yes, Mom,” he answers, his tone getting serious. “I haven’t felt anything strange or

tried to shift. We'll call you guys right away if anything happens."

"You're a good boy, Nico," I say softly. It breaks my heart that he's this mature and self-aware enough to understand the situation and have to monitor himself, but it makes me proud as well.

"Thanks, Mom," he says, then laughs a little. "When I'm not causing mass destruction of property, I'm an angel, right?"

Galen and I both laugh. "It's not your fault, kiddo, and we're going to help you. I promise," I say a bit forcefully.

"I believe you," Nico says.

I grip the phone a bit tighter as I hear the tone of his voice, so full of trust and love.

He's really growing up. This move has changed him, and we've been so lucky that nothing happened when we were out in the world. We're protected here.

"Well, I just wanted to let you know that we'll be home tomorrow, probably in the afternoon," I say. "Are you okay there?"

"I'm fine," he answers. "Winnie's not. I've kicked her ass like three times."

"How dare you!" Winnie yells, roaring with laughter. "I've been letting you win."

"Keep telling yourself that," Nico laughs. "I heard that apparently, the only reason you have a perfect score is because Jerry always lets you win."

"Ahh!" Winnie yells. "You swine! How dare you spread such rumors about me!"

We hear a brief wrestle, and Winnie comes back on the line. I can hear Nico laughing in the background.

“You don’t need to worry about your child,” Winnie says. “But I may be suing for damages when this is over.”

“I’ll see you well-compensated,” Galen laughs.

“You’d better. Get on with it, then, you two. I expect full explanations when you get back.”

“Can do,” Galen says. “Good night, Winnie, and thank you.”

“Gratitude is cheap, brother. I want actual compensation.”

“We’ll talk about that,” he sighs, rolling his eyes. “Goodnight, Winnie.”

Just as we hang up, I hear Nico inquiring about the “compensation” and Winnie’s triumphant laughter.

“Oh no,” Galen mutters. “He’s going to demand presents and favors now, isn’t he?”

I shrug. “It was your idea to expose him to your sister.”

Galen sighs. “You’re right. I take the full blame for this.”

The words hang in the air for a moment, and I don’t know how to respond.

He has taken the blame... for everything.

“We should find a safe spot to park for the night,” Galen says. “Even though it looks

pretty quiet here, I'm not keen on staying next to the cemetery."

"Me either," I agree. "Let's head into town. I could definitely go for something to eat."

"Me too," Galen says as we jump into the RV.

The town is much smaller than Quartz Key, with only a few shops huddled around a main street that pans out into a small suburban settlement. One of the only places that looks welcoming is a bar, and not far from it is an empty camping ground next to the river.

Galen parks in one of the bays, and I jump down from the RV, still feeling shaken up but more determined than I was before. I came here to find what I needed to help my son, and instead, I had all the bandages ripped from every old wound I've carried my whole life.

It was time for them to be opened. Now I know for sure that I will never see my mother again. She can't help me... but she can't hurt me, either.

I look over at Galen as we walk towards the bar, studying his profile in the dim light. I believe every word he said, and it scares me.

If I believe it, then maybe I never had to run away. Maybe all this pain I went through was for nothing.

That idea is too painful to contemplate, so I push it away as Galen opens the doors, and we step inside the bar. It's fairly busy, with a rumble of chatter rising over the sounds of the musician playing on the stage.

"Would you like a drink?" Galen asks.

“Yeah,” I answer. “I definitely do. I could use one after today.”

“What would you like? I’ll head up to the bar if you want to find us a table.”

“Rum and Coke would be great,” I reply. “And some food. Nothing fancy. A burger and fries is fine.”

“Sure thing.”

Galen heads off to the bar, and I find an empty table. He finds me a few minutes later, carrying our drinks and a jug of beer.

“I definitely need more than one drink,” he says with a sigh. “I feel like I’ve been through the wringer.”

“Me too,” I answer, taking a deep sip of rum and Coke.

“I know today was a lot to take in,” Galen says. “But I think it’s helpful information.”

“Maybe,” I consider, staring into my glass. “But in the end, we didn’t actually find out what to do for Nico.”

Galen sighs again, and I look up at him. His face is drawn, and his eyes are fatigued. I feel like I’m staring straight into his soul.

He really is exhausted. Not from the trip, but from everything we heard, and his confession to me.

Mixed with my own hurt and betrayal is a deep sympathy for everything Galen went through after he broke up with me. I know he suffered—terribly—and that hurts me. It doesn’t change the fact that I can’t just give my trust to him. At the end of the day,

he chose to turn on me instead of anyone else in his life.

“Tell me about Nico,” Galen says, meeting my eyes. “I look at him now, and I can’t believe I never got to see him grow up. I feel so connected to him already, but there’s still so much I don’t know.”

“Okay,” I answer, smiling. “What do you want to know?”

“When’s his birthday?”

“October sixth,” I reply. “He was born early in the morning, and I’d been in labor most of the night. When the midwife finally handed him to me, a bright ray of sun came through the window and flickered across his face. And when he opened his eyes, they were gold like mine.”

Galen gives a little smile. “I noticed.”

I shake my head. “No, babies are supposed to have blue eyes. It’s very rare for them to show a specific color that early. The nurses were surprised, but I thought it was evidence he had the shifter gene.”

“Even though he had your eyes?”

I shrug. “It doesn’t matter that his eyes were the same color as mine. It was the fact that he seemed more developed than other babies, to the point where he was born with a set color that didn’t change. After that, it became pretty obvious. He was so much stronger and faster than other kids.”

My heart swells with pride as I remember watching him playing at the park when he was a toddler, leaping onto monkey bars and climbing walls. He was smart from an early age, too, picking up math and language much quicker than the rest of his class.

“He was always getting awards,” I continue. “And he had so many friends. That only started to change over the last year. I really thought he was going to grow up with a strong support system, with people who truly loved him, and that he’d feel connected and have a life I never had.”

“He will,” Galen says, taking my hand. “I promise you, he will. He doesn’t have to do any of this alone.”

I look into Galen’s eyes, and in his gaze, I see so much love. Pain flickers in my chest, and I have to look away again.

Our food arrives, and as we eat, I take the conversation to more frivolous things. I tell Galen about Nico’s birthday parties, class awards, and school activities, as well as funny mishaps from when he learned to ride a bike and roller-blade.

By the time we’re done with the pizza, we’ve stacked up a few empty glasses on the table. Neither of us has slowed down on the rum or the beer.

I need to let loose, even if it’s just a little. It’s been so long since I really let myself go.

“Hey,” Galen says with a grin. “Do you want to dance?”

I start giggling and shaking my head. “I hate dancing. You know that.”

“Come on.” Galen stands up and pulls a pose, extending a hand to me and pointing his toes as he flexes his other arm back. “If you don’t take my hand, I’m going to start twirling around the table.”

I giggle some more, excited but also partially terrified—because I know damn well he’ll go through with it.

“Okay,” I give in, putting my hand in his. “Lead away!”

Galen pulls me up against him, then spins us onto the dance floor. The single musician who was on when we arrived has been replaced by a jivy rock band, and the bouncy tunes have me shimmying around the floor, moving like the music is becoming part of me.

Every now and then, Galen reaches out, touching my shoulders, arms, or hips. Sometimes he takes my hands and gives me a twirl. Excitement rises in me, swiftly overtaking the lingering fear.

When the music slows, Galen wraps his arms around me and pulls me against his chest. I don’t resist, but I do keep my guard up. We sway to the music, and I rock back and forth, very aware of his hands on my shoulders and his body pressed up against mine.

I wrap my arms around his waist and stroke his back, leaning my head on his chest. The delicious warmth that rises between us intoxicates me, heating up my thighs. An ache begins to throb deep inside me.

Memories of our night in the woods flood through me, and my breathing speeds up. Along with the warmth rushing through my body, my heart starts to pound, and my nipples feel hard and tight against my bra.

I look up at Galen, running one hand across his chest. I can feel the firm muscles under the soft fabric of his shirt, the heat of his skin, and underneath it all, the pounding of his heart.

“I love you, Clara,” he whispers, looking into my eyes. “I always have, and I always will. I will be there for you and for Nico for the rest of your lives. You’ll never have to be alone again.”

Tears fill my eyes, and even though I want to pull away, I can't. I'm drawn to Galen even as my instincts tell me to run. When he lowers his head, I turn my face up, helpless in his arms.

God help me, but I love you, Galen, and I can't fucking stop!

His lips touch mine, and I cling to him, pressing our bodies together. His arms go around my waist, and even though he strokes my sides and back, he doesn't try to grope me. The kiss is all sweetness and care, and I feel safer than I ever have in my whole life.

I deepen the kiss, stretching up on my toes and putting my hands around his neck to draw him down to me. I feel his tongue flicking against mine, and hot points of desire burn in response, racing through my breasts, my clit, and deep within me, where the throbbing ache begs for his cock to satisfy me.

Words of love threaten to come to my lips, and I kiss Galen even harder to stop them. His hot mouth, slick tongue, and searching hands overwhelm my senses, shoving sense aside as arousal sweeps away all my restraint and self-control.

I can't stop kissing him, and my body's reaction can't be hidden. But I'm not opening my heart!

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I press my arms against Clara's waist, pulling her towards me. She falls against my chest, laughing and looking up at me with bright, happy eyes. Music is pulsing through both of us, a palpable force joining us together as we dance to the same beat.

The warmth flooding through Clara's body is impossible to ignore. I can sense it crashing against her inner thighs, rising through her core, and turning her nipples into stiff peaks against me. The scent that rises from between her breasts is thick and sweet, making my mouth water as I think about searching for the source of it with my lips.

I wrap my hands around her waist a bit tighter, the urge to reach down and grab her ass almost unbearable. She's vulnerable in my arms right now, and I have to be careful.

She has to be completely sure that she wants me. I won't coerce her.

Then Clara grabs my hips and yanks my body towards hers, sliding her hips back and forth. I have to close my eyes and gulp hard to maintain my control.

I can't take much more of this!

"Hey," she says, so softly that I can barely hear her. "Do you want to get out of here?"

I nod, not trusting my voice. She takes my hand and leads me across the dance floor, which has gotten a little packed since we started dancing. Following behind Clara as we leave the bar, I can't stop looking at the luscious curve of her hips or her toned ass

under the fitted, floral dress.

As we cross the parking lot, Clara puts her arms around my waist and stumbles. I catch her, but end up tripping over my own feet. Clara puts a hand on my chest, giggling as I regain my balance to hold us both up.

“I don’t know about you, but I think I hit the sauce pretty hard tonight,” she says. “I can hardly see.”

“I know what you mean,” I say, grinning. “I’m definitely feeling it, but I think I’m doing better than you if you need me to carry you.”

“No way,” she laughs. “Even though I have complete faith in your shifter metabolism, you almost hit the pavement just there. I’m not taking any chances.”

“Fair enough,” I answer, smiling. “But that means you’ll have to actually use your own feet.”

“Damn,” she mutters. “Curse you and your logic! How do I even find my feet right now?”

She looks down at the ground, as if looking at her feet might help her decide how to use them. She frowns.

“Your logic is flawed,” she says. “It seems I no longer have feet.”

“Those are your knees, Clara,” I say. “I’d suggest looking further down, but I’m worried you’ll fall, so maybe just trust me that your feet are actually there.”

She sighs, looking up and across the parking lot. “I suppose I’ll have to. How else am I supposed to get to the RV?”

She takes one step and stumbles. With one quick motion, I put my arms around her and pick her up, snuggling her against my chest.

“Don’t drop me!” she giggles.

“Never,” I answer.

I’ll never let you go.

While I walk over to the RV, Clara strokes my shoulder with one hand, her breathing slowly getting deeper and more labored. I can still sense the signs of arousal, but I won’t dare make a move unless she asks me to.

This is going to be one torturous night. It was bad enough being in my bed and not being able to touch her. The RV is ten times smaller!

When I reach the back door, I level Clara up to the latch, and she opens it. I lift her carefully and set her down on the floor before crawling up the steps and slamming the door behind us.

When I turn back to face her, she’s still sitting on the floor. She’s stretched out, propped up on her arms with her feet pointed towards me. Her light cotton dress drapes against her curves, her scent seeping through it to fill the air.

My wolf is panting, and I’m fighting it with every last scrap of strength. My fingers twitch, my fists clench, and my cock presses painfully against my zipper.

If this keeps up, I’m going to need bigger pants.

“Galen,” Clara whispers.

Some of my control fails, and I get on all fours, crawling towards her. I can feel her lust growing, but I can also see fear in her eyes.

Sitting up a little, I reach out and slip her shoe off her foot, caressing her ankle. The feel of her skin against my fingertips almost breaks me, but I manage to take off both her shoes and put them aside without giving in to my arousal.

When I look up, Clara's eyes are fixed on me, and she's breathing hard. Where my fingers lightly stroke her ankles, goosebumps start to rise across her skin, colliding with the arousal pounding between her legs.

"Can I help you with the rest of your clothes?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even. To my surprise, she nods and looks down at the front of her dress.

"I definitely can't do buttons right now," she says with a lopsided smile.

I start to move towards her, and I basically have to crawl right on top of her, because the back of the RV only has a thin corridor between the equipment cabinets at the back.

When my face reaches her thighs, I have to stop, taking deep breaths and closing my eyes as I revel in her sweet scent. When she shifts a little, I look up at her, and all I can see in her face is desire.

"Clara, please—"

"Shh," she whispers. After giving me one last intense look, she lays back on the floor and opens her legs.

A groan of need rips through my throat as I shove the light dress up to her hips. I look hungrily at her pussy. I rub her gently through her panties, and she writhes under me,

thrusting her hips into the pressure. I rub harder and feel the panties getting wet from the strength of her arousal.

Clara moans and covers her face, opening her knees even further. I grab the waistband of her panties and pull them down her thighs, leaving them at her knees as I lean forward and slide my tongue between the outer lips of her pussy to lap at her clit.

Moaning, I hold her knees together, keeping her trapped and struggling under me as I punish her clit with my tongue. Clara screams and writhes, trying to get her legs open further, but I hold her still and focus on that one super-sensitive pleasure spot.

When her cries start to sound desperate, I let go of her knees and shove my face down lower, licking deep into her pussy and gripping her thighs. Clara yells as she grabs my hair, yanking on it as her hips buck up and down. As she starts to come, a moan of pure pleasure bursts out of me, and I thrust my tongue inside her to lap up all her sweet juice.

When I finally feel her fingers relax against my scalp, I give one last, long lick all the way up her clit and press it gently between my lips. She shudders and moans, her breath rushing out as her hands cover her face again. I crawl up her body slowly, enjoying her scent. I'm so close, I can almost taste the luscious, warm skin on the other side of the thin cotton dress.

When I reach her face, I look down at her, my excitement heightened by being in such a cramped space with her. I run one hand down her body, gently teasing at the buttons on the front of the dress.

"Clara," I whisper. "Do you want this?"

I rock my hips towards her so she can feel how hard I am through my pants. She

opens her eyes, and with her flushed cheeks, red lips, and pleasure-stunned gaze, she's the most beautiful sight I've ever seen.

"Yes, Galen!" she cries. "I want you... I want you inside me right fucking now!"

Her words break something inside me, and need rips through my every muscle. Barely registering what I'm doing, I grab a fistful of fabric from the front of the dress and twist, pulling my arm back. The buttons break, scattering all over the floor as the dress tears open.

I reach down and wrench my own pants down, just enough to free my cock, then thrust forward, desperate to be inside her. Clara opens her legs and puts her arms around me, grabbing my ass to pull me towards her.

As my cock slides into her wet heat, a yell rips from my mouth, pleasure streaking through every inch of me, shocking my every nerve. I close my eyes and brace myself above her, trembling at the intensity of the moment.

When I open my eyes, Clara is watching me, her gaze deep and compassionate. Gold shimmers across her irises, a beacon of her own pleasure and connection to me.

I start to thrust, my movements hindered by the small space. I'm forced to make short, powerful strokes, and even though it's frustrating to me, Clara goes wild, linking her hands on my back and wrapping her legs around my hips.

Keeping up the short, fast thrusts, I brace my arms over her shoulders, pounding her into the floor. I feel her deepest muscles clenching and spasming, hugging my cock as tension streaks through her. As her climax peaks, she squeezes me with her arms and legs, and then, as the waves of pleasure begin to subside, her whole body goes limp. She barely clings to me, making small, whimpering sounds.

I'm still hard as a rock inside her, and when I move, she murmurs happily, stroking my back with one hand as her pussy clenches around me again. I get up with some difficulty, eventually managing to pick Clara up and move us to the bed.

"Hmm," she murmurs as she stretches out across the big, soft mattress. "That was amazing."

I kneel on the bed next to her and run my hand down her chest and belly. Her bra and panties are nowhere to be seen, and I can only assume they were ripped off as my passion overtook my senses.

"Clara," I whisper. "Do you want more?"

My cock is still rock-hard, and arousal rages through me, making my blood boil. If I don't take her soon, my wolf might take over, and I wouldn't be able to stop him.

I'd have to hunt if I can't fuck. The only thing that would satisfy him if I couldn't take my mate is a fresh kill.

Clara looks up at me, rubbing her breasts with her hands. "Yes, Galen. More."

I rip my shirt off with both hands, hearing it tear as I pull it over my head. I hear Clara gasp lustfully, and when I get up to pull my pants off, she keeps her eyes fixed on me.

For a moment, I enjoy her eyes on me, her lingering gaze stoking the flames of my lust. But I can't hold back for long. I throw myself on top of her, attacking her breasts with my mouth.

Clara writhes under me, moaning as her hands claw at the back of my head. I push her down on the bed, trapping her beneath me as I thrust my hips against hers, licking

and sucking her nipples. I can feel her slick, hot pussy right near the head of my cock, the wet heat begging for me to pierce it, but all I do is tease her as I feast on her tits.

She writhes under me, desperate cries bursting from her throat. I run my hands down her sides, grabbing her hips and drawing my cock closer to her pussy. Clara screams and thrashes under me, wrapping her arms around me, grabbing my ass as she tries to force our bodies together.

“Fuck me, Galen!” she screams. “Fuck me!”

I close my eyes as a powerful wave of lust rushes through me, flooding straight into my cock until I’m harder and thicker than I’ve ever been. I enter her slowly, inch by inch, feeling her hot, slick folds squeezing around my cock.

Clara thrashes, writhing as she tries to thrust against me. I keep up my incredibly slow pace until I sink all the way in, balls deep, my cock as far inside her as it can possibly go.

She stops moving, her body completely wrapped around mine. I can feel her nails digging into my ass cheeks, her heels against my thighs. When I look down, her eyes are wide, and her face is blank with desire.

I lean down and kiss her very softly. She whimpers, trembles, flooding through her. I graze her lips with mine again, teasing, feeling her body shivering against mine.

Then I cup one hand behind her head and wrap my other arm around her waist, crushing her against me. I move my hips in long, deep strokes, feeling her pussy clenching around me, her hot, slick heat gripping me as I thrust.

My wolf rises in me, and my body tenses, hardening my muscles. I grip her even more tightly in my arms, pressing my teeth against her neck as I start to thrust harder

and faster.

Clara clings to me, her grip on my waist faltering as her knees slip away from my thighs. I'm beyond control now as I thrust into her as hard and fast as I possibly can, feeling my cock thickening inside her tight pussy with every stroke.

I hit my climax, freezing as the pleasure comes, so intense that I feel like I'm about to pass out. Clara's pussy grips my cock, and she convulses under me as another orgasm rocks through her. My cock shudders and blows, our orgasms becoming one.

We stay wrapped together for a while, cheek against cheek, as our breathing slows. When I roll over to lie beside her, she strokes my cheek, and we look into each other's eyes.

I watch her beautiful face until her eyes start to close, then I cuddle her close to my chest, and she snuggles against me. Even though the sex is the best I've ever had, it is this moment that means the most to me—that she feels so safe she can fall asleep in my arms.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

The sky is bright and clear overhead, rolling above our heads as Galen navigates the last ridge of Lycan Pass to take us down into the valley to Quartz Key. We set off not long after dawn and made it back to Cyan Lock mid-morning, where we switched Kit's RV for Galen's car and started heading home.

Even though I feel shaken, I also feel strength awakening deep inside me. This trip has brought me so much loss and yet so much love, I still don't know how to process it. When I woke in the RV, Galen had breakfast and coffee waiting for me, as well as a fresh change of clothes. Neither of us brought it up the night before.

The car dips suddenly onto the town trail, the expanse of blue above covered by the thick trees that line the valley. My stomach does a little flip as I think about Nico.

I can't wait to see him, but at the same time, I don't really have any answers for him.

"Did you want me to take you straight home?" Galen asks as we hit the edges of town. "My phone has been buzzing, so I think I've got somewhere to be, but let me know what you want to do."

"Where's Nico?" I ask, pulling out my phone. I see a couple of messages from Winnie, letting me know that he's fine and to message her when we get back. I fire off a quick text to her, and she replies that they are at the park with some other kids.

"Where should I drop you off?" Galen asks, glancing over at me.

"Anywhere in town. They're at the park."

“Okay, I’ll stop at the town hall. I’m pretty sure someone’s waiting for me there, anyway.”

We pull up behind the main building, and Galen goes in through the back while I head for the street. The park isn’t far, and I pick up my pace, looking forward to seeing my son again.

Even though I’m not much better off now than I was before, I don’t know exactly what to do, but I know I’ll work it out.

I’m so distracted that I don’t notice the people ahead of me on the sidewalk until I almost run into them. Startled, I jump back a bit to see Jacinta and the Haggertys blocking my path.

“Clara,” Jacinta says in a hard tone. “We need to speak with you.”

Her tone irks me, but I try to answer gracefully. “Yes, Jacinta? What can I do for you?”

“You had no right to take Galen out of the valley,” Mrs. Haggerty snaps, cutting in. “It left us vulnerable. We need our alpha!”

“That’s right,” George backs up his wife. “There was important business to discuss right before he left, and instead of tending to it, Galen just walked out of the meeting early. We can’t have him distracted like this.”

“We were gone for one night!” I protest, my voice rising in anger. “What could have possibly happened in that time?”

“Nothing happened this time,” Jacinta says tartly. “But it could have.”

“I’ve been warning him,” George goes on, “an alpha’s work is never done. Loyalty to the pack must come first. He won’t put extra guards on the territory like I’ve told him to, and it’s going to be our ruin.”

“George,” I say as calmly as possible, “Galen is your alpha, and he is completely devoted to the pack. You don’t need to worry about this. It’s true he had important matters to attend to, but if he decided not to heed your advice, I’m sure he had very good reason.”

“Really?” Mrs. Haggerty snaps. “Is that why he told us we should make plans for extending the council, then immediately left, giving Sherman free rein?”

“I’m sure Galen never intended that,” I answer stiffly. “He’s back now, so he can attend to all of these matters personally.”

“None of this changes the fact that he left the valley unattended because of you!” Jacinta hisses. “He wouldn’t dream of leaving us alone and unprotected... until you came back.”

Even though her words make me want to defend Galen, they give me pause.

She’s implying that Galen is going out of his way for me.

“You weren’t alone and unprotected,” I answer. “Galen had backup watching over Quartz Key.”

“Enemy packs!” George dismisses. “The very ones I’m trying to defend us against, I’m sure! Next thing you know, he’ll be admitting them into our council!”

“The trouble, my dear, is you,” Mrs. Haggerty says, advancing on me, narrowing her eyes as her voice lowers to a hiss. “I don’t know why you came back to town, but you

shouldn't have. You have been nothing but trouble your whole life, and now you and your brat—"

"Mrs. Haggerty," a bright voice cuts in. "How are you today? Well, I hope?"

Winnie throws an arm around my shoulders, standing next to me like a wingman ready to protect my six. I was so distracted by the terrible things I was hearing, I didn't even notice her approach.

"Hello, Winnie," George mumbles.

"And hello to you, George!" she replies. "Look at all of you, welcoming Galen's mate back to town. Mother will be so pleased to hear it."

All three of them look extremely uncomfortable at the idea of Macy finding out about their actions. Jacinta even looks around furtively, as if the old matriarch is hiding nearby, spying on us.

"We were just—" Jacinta starts.

"Oh, I know!" Winnie gushes. "You're all so kind. It's good to see how much you support Galen that you'd personally come and accost his mate right here, in public, just to show how much you care."

"She's right," someone speaks from behind us, and I turn around to see Delia and Nathan not far away.

"What do you want?" Jacinta asks bluntly.

"Galen is at the town hall with Sherman," Delia answers. "I thought you guys might want to be there, since you have so much to say on pack business."

“He’s having a meeting now?” George demands.

Delia shrugs. “He got all your messages, so I’m guessing he went straight there. Pretty poor of you to demand to see the alpha, then not show up.”

I can’t stop a huge smile spreading across my face at Delia’s tactful maneuvering.

“Better get a move on,” Nathan suggests. “We wouldn’t want to keep Galen waiting.”

“We’ll be sure to tell him how kind it was of you to personally greet Clara on her arrival,” Delia says, blinking innocently. “Good deeds shouldn’t go unrewarded.”

The other three break up, going around us to hurry towards the Town Hall. Delia gives me a wave before following after them, and Winnie gives me a big hug.

“You’ve got plenty of us in your corner, Clara,” she says. “Don’t worry about that.”

“I never knew that,” I reply numbly, letting Winnie lead me over to the park, where I can see the kids playing in the distance.

“Hey, don’t get me wrong,” Winnie laughs. “I don’t think most of the pack is in a hurry to throw a party for you. But I, for one, missed you badly.”

“Thank you, Winnie,” I say, hugging her. “I was surprised to see Delia and Nathan standing up for me, though. I thought they were big supporters of Cliff.”

“They were, but now Mom is spreading it around that you’re good for the pack and have done a great job raising her grandson,” Winnie explains. “More people are coming out in your favor. There were plenty of people who were behind you before this, but now that Mom has accepted you, it’s made other pack members really stop and think about your reputation. Most of them have realized there is no basis for it.”

“It?” I repeat, feeling my heart sink a little.

We all know what “it” is.

“Hey.” Winnie gives me a quick hug. “Not having the shifter gene doesn’t mean you aren’t part of the family, okay? Your dad was one of us, and you are, too.”

I have nothing else to say as we cross the park towards where the kids are playing. I know now for sure that even if my dad was a wolf, I’ll never be one. And I can’t be a witch, either.

“Mom!” I hear Nico cry out. He runs off the field towards me. I bend down, and he barrels straight into me, almost knocking me off my feet.

“Hi, kiddo,” I say, laughing. “Have you had fun with Aunt Winnie?”

“I did!” he answers happily. “She let me have cake for breakfast!”

“That was supposed to be our little secret,” Winnie reminds him, giving him a look.

“It’s okay,” I say, smiling. “I condone sweets for breakfast on most occasions.”

“Excellent,” Winnie says, clapping her hands together. “Because it’s pretty much all I ever eat, and I plan to babysit quite a bit.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” I grin at her. “Did Nico charm you that much?”

“We had fun!” Nico exclaims. “It’s so nice to have family.”

His words hit me like shards of ice right in the chest. My smile falters, and all I can think about is what I never had—and how I almost took it from Nico by taking him

away from his pack.

And maybe none of this had to happen. Galen didn't mean for me to run away. And when my father died, I had support here. I just didn't realize it.

What have I done?

"Hey, Mom," Nico says quickly, noticing my expression. "It's okay, I promise. I know that for a long time, we weren't safe here, but we are now, aren't we?"

"Yes, Nico," I answer, hugging him. "We're safe now."

"Did you find out anything about my powers?" he asks.

"Not really, baby," I reply sadly. "All I know is, you're a witch as well as a wolf, and I can never be either one."

"That's harsh," Winnie remarks. "Never?"

I shake my head, looking up at her. "Never."

"That's sad, Mom," Nico agrees. "I promise to be extra good with my powers to make you proud, okay?"

"Okay, kiddo," I tell him, smiling. "Go and play, now. As soon as your dad's finished at town hall, we can go home."

Nico runs back to the game, and I sit down at a nearby picnic table with Winnie.

"So, you found something, then?" she asks.

I shake my head. “Not much, really. Someone who claimed to be my aunt, who told me my mother got mixed up in some crazy magic. Said that my dad probably died because of it. I’ll never have the powers of a wolf or a witch, and I don’t really know how to help Nico.”

“We’ll get through it,” Winnie says, rubbing my hand. “I promise. We’re in this together.”

“Thank you, Winnie,” I say, meaning it. “I appreciate everything you’ve done for us—including standing up for me just now.”

“Don’t mention it,” Winnie giggles. “I take every opportunity to ruffle old Ma Haggerty’s feathers. I was doing it for myself, really!”

Winnie’s mirth is infectious, as always, and I can feel my worries slide away as we laugh together. My carefree moment doesn’t last long, though, because I see Galen approaching from the street. My stomach lurches.

Maybe one day, I’ll be able to look at him without immediately getting slammed by equal parts lust and fear.

He doesn’t come towards us, but runs straight out onto the field with the kids. They are kicking a soccer ball up and down the field, having fun without bothering too much about rules. Galen joins in, kicking the ball between both goal posts, scoring points for each team.

After a bit of running up and down, with Galen continuously switching sides, all the kids are laughing so hard, they can’t play anymore. They fall down into an ungainly heap with Galen, tackling him. He disappears under a teeming wave of shouting, laughing children.

Watching Galen roar with mock fury as he gently tosses the kids around tugs at my heart. When Nico jumps out of the crowd and wraps his arms around his father's neck, I watch Galen smile back at him. My heart feels so full, it could burst out of my chest.

They are so connected. It's like they always knew each other, even though they never met.

My mind slips back to the night before, and I try to stay calm as I let the memories run through my head. I was drunk—really drunk—and I don't remember everything, but I know I wanted it, and I begged Galen to fuck me.

It's just sex , I remind myself . We always had chemistry—that's no secret.

But as stubbornly as I try to hold on to this thought and tell myself it's true, I know it's not the whole truth.

I can't give my heart to him again. There's no way I can just turn back the clock and pretend the past never happened. I might never be able to trust again after what Galen did to me.

Besides, I don't know if he truly loves me now or just wants to heal his own guilt.

Watching him play with Nico, I can't ignore the absolute truth inside me.

My feelings for Galen never wavered. Not once. Even when I was crying over him, I knew that some part of me still loved him...

And that's why I'm so afraid.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

My rushed meeting with the council upon arriving at the town hall sets my nerves on edge. Sherman isn't backing down on his bid to expand the council, and when the rest of the elders show up, it's obvious to me that everyone has ulterior motives.

I just don't know what they are. There is dissent here, and I have to figure it out.

I end the meeting quickly and leave, heading to the park to find Clara and Nico. I decide to ask Mother about pack politics later and follow up with Kit.

He's always been someone I can rely on. He's always eager to hear what's going on in Quartz Key and lend advice. I couldn't ask for a better friend.

Even though I know some elders—possibly even Mother—would be horrified at the idea of me asking advice from the alpha of another pack, I trust Kit. And I don't think every wolf in Lycan Pass is out to take my territory.

My mood lifts the second I see Winnie and Clara standing by the field. They look pretty deep in conversation, so I jump straight into soccer practice, kicking goals all over the place to create utter chaos. The kids all tackle me, and I end up covered in dirt, buried under a pile of screaming wolf pups.

All the kids are laughing, but Nico's smile hits me the hardest. Not just because he's my son, but because there's a sense of joy in him that seems hard-won.

He couldn't be himself in the human world. Even though he still hasn't found his place here, he knows he's with his own kind... and with his family.

After the kids wrestle me to the ground, I buy everyone ice cream and hang out with them as their parents pick them up.

I feel more useful here than I do at the stupid council meetings. What better use is there of my time than taking care of our next generation?

As the others leave, I'm left with Clara and Nico, all of us sitting at the edge of the field, watching the sun go down.

"Did you have a good day, kiddo?" I ask Nico.

"I sure did! Aunt Winnie is the best. It was really nice of you to come and play with us, Dad. And buy us ice cream."

"Don't mention it, kiddo!" I say. "I want to be there for you every single day. I missed so much of your life, I don't want to miss a second more."

I see Clara look away, and I wonder if I said the wrong thing. Nico doesn't seem to notice, though. He just holds my hand as we watch the sun begin to set.

"Have you had any trouble with your powers, Nico?" I ask.

Clara looks sharply at me, and I just shrug.

We have to ask. The last time his powers were out of control, it was a disaster.

"Well, I did have this weird feeling a couple of times," Nico admits. "If I try real hard, I can force it to go away. Like, closing my eyes and wishing for it to stop."

"That's no good, Nico," Clara says, stroking his hair back. "You can't run from it, or deny it. It'll just bottle up inside you until it gets so big, you can't hold on to it. Then,

when it does break free, it can destroy everything around you.”

“But I don’t know what else to do, Mom,” Nico says sadly.

“I tell you what,” I say. “Let’s go for a little walk in the woods, and we’ll see what happens if you let it go.”

“I don’t want to hurt anyone!” Nico cries, sounding terrified.

“And you won’t,” I say firmly. “I promise. I’ll be with you the whole time, and so will your mom. I’d like to see you work with your wolf, too. The primal power of your wolf awakening, along with the witch magic flowing through you, must be very difficult to handle. The wolf part, I can help with, and maybe that will help with the magic, too.”

“Okay, Dad,” Nico answers, smiling a little. “Let’s do it.”

Clara still looks worried, but she follows us across the soccer field into the woods. I find a small clearing surrounded by young trees, a wide space well out of the way from any dwellings or roads.

“Okay, Nico,” I say, standing behind him. “Try focusing on the feeling. Where does it start?”

“Really deep in my tummy,” he answers.

“Good. Is it the same as your wolf power?”

“Not really,” he answers with a frown. “When I’m going to change, my skin feels like it’s burning, and my blood boils. Then it hurts—like, really bad. Like getting ripped open. After that, I don’t remember much.”

“Your wolf is ruling you,” I state. “That’s not uncommon at the start, especially if you haven’t been guided through your first shift. It shouldn’t be that painful, and with time, you’ll keep your awareness through the shift.”

“Okay,” Nico considers. “I don’t feel any of that now, though. Just this feeling in my tummy. Then my chest gets warm, it flows up to my hands, and that’s where I can usually stop it. I don’t know what happens if I let it go.”

“That’s what we’re about to find out,” I say, moving around to stand beside him. “I want you to focus on that feeling, Nico. Let it rise in you. Don’t hold it back.”

“Okay,” he says, closing his eyes.

At first, it doesn’t look like anything is happening. Then I notice orange flickers of light on Nico’s hands as he extends them forward. I watch in fascination as Nico frowns, keeping his eyes closed, but the bright glow slowly moves up his body until his hands shimmer.

“Okay,” Nico whispers. “Should I let it go?”

“Yes, go on,” I answer, feeling excited now.

Nico screws up his face and grunts, a bright flash erupting from his hands. Clara screams, and at the last second, I realize she’s in front of Nico, directly in the line of fire.

With a yell of dismay, I leap at Clara, slamming into her and throwing her to the ground. I keep her pinned under me as the flash goes over us. A powerful snap echoes through the air, as if lightning just struck above our heads.

I only made it because of my preternatural speed. Clara was helpless!

“Mom!” Nico screams, running over to us. “Are you okay? Mom?”

“I’m okay,” Clara says, soothing him. “It was my fault for not paying attention.”

“It was my fault,” I say firmly. “None of this is on you, Nico. I should have made sure the area was clear.”

“I don’t think I want to do that again,” he says nervously, his voice shaking.

“Hey,” I say, taking Nico’s shoulders and looking into his eyes. “You don’t have to be afraid, okay? I’m right here, looking after both of you. I know that was close, but we’re alright. Even better—we learned something! How about this time, instead of having your eyes closed, you focus on a tree or a rock?”

“I don’t know,” Nico says, looking at his hands. “I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“That’s exactly my point, son,” I say gently. “We need to find out what happens. That’s the only way we can keep you—and everyone else—safe.”

Nico nods. His face is tense but determined. I stand up and turn him away from us, keeping Clara behind me as I look for a suitable target.

Buried deep beneath the calm face I’m putting on for Nico, a boiling pit of fear threatens to consume me. Images of Clara’s broken, burned body crash through my mind, searing my nerves with panic.

I couldn’t handle it if something happened to her!

Nico looks over his shoulder, and I smile, giving him a thumbs-up. He smiles back.

“Are you sure you’re alright, Mom?” he asks.

Clara nods. “Perfectly okay, sweetie. I’ve got some dirt on me, and I’ve had better hair days, but I’m fine.”

Nico’s smile grows, and he turns back around. After a moment, he points to a decent-sized tree.

“Okay, Dad,” he says. “Should I just go for it?”

“Sure,” I say. “Just do the same thing you did before, but think about hitting the tree, nothing else.”

“Right,” Nico says softly. I watch the orange glow flicker across his body, rising through his chest and then intensifying in his hands. When the color begins to burn bright white, Nico raises his arms and lets the energy go with a little cry of effort.

A shimmer of energy rushes across the clearing, hurling leaves and dirt into the sky as if a tornado is ripping through the woods. I hold on to Clara as the bolt hits the tree, shattering it into sawdust.

For a moment, all I can do is stare. There is no wreckage, no roots or branches left. Only big piles of woodchips and dust.

“Wow, Dad,” Nico says breathlessly, looking at the destruction. “Did I really do that?”

“Yes, you did,” I answer, and Clara pushes past me to hug him.

“You did great, baby!” she says. “How do you feel?”

“Really good,” Nico says, looking at his hands. “I actually feel better than before, like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.”

“That means we should do it again!” I say excitedly. “Come on, kiddo, let’s see what you can do!”

I grab Nico’s hand and position him in front of another tree. This time, the process of drawing up the magic takes less time, and the bolt of energy he directs is much more focused.

“This is great, Dad!” Nico exclaims, laughing. “I don’t feel scared anymore!”

“Excellent,” I answer, hugging him. “We didn’t find out much while we were away, but we did find out that if you’re scared of your power, it will be a curse, not a blessing.”

Nico looks at his hands, his eyes wide. “I’m not sure it’s a blessing,” he says.

“Of course it is,” Clara counters, brushing his hair back and stroking his cheeks. “You are a blessing, my love. So your power must be, too.”

“We just have to find something for you to focus on,” I say. “Something other than poor old trees. As good as this is, we can’t have you blowing up entire forests when you feel a surge coming on.”

“Yeah,” Nico agrees. “I feel like I’m all used up now, but it will come back.”

“And I still need to help you connect with your wolf,” I say. “You must have turned away from the moon because of your magic, but I promise, Nico, you will run with the pack by my side.”

“I felt this inside me, my whole life,” Nico admits. “But it wasn’t until my wolf woke up that it started to take me over. It was really scary, Dad, having those nightmares and stuff.”

I feel a sharp pain slice my chest, and I have to swallow a lump in my throat.

My son needed me, and I wasn’t there for him.

“I’m here now,” I say firmly. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

Nico jumps into my arms, squeezing me as hard as he can. When I look over at Clara, she’s standing next to me with tears welling in her eyes. I hold out my arm for her, and she joins the hug.

Knowing that both of them needed me and I wasn’t there cuts me to my core. No matter what Clara says or does, I will always carry the blame for this because I didn’t look for her.

I should never have broken up with her in the first place. All of this is mine to carry.

I snuggle both of them closer to me, as if holding them to my chest can heal all the guilt shredding my heart.

I might not be able to heal the past, but I can be here in the present... and never, ever let them down in the future.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

I'm wrapped in soft, comforting dreams when I hear an odd, far-off scraping sound. I try to ignore it and dive back down into the dream, but it persists, a whisper of dissent at the edge of bliss.

The bright happiness of my visions surrounds me, a place where I'm relaxed and free. A place where I don't have to be scared, and I know that Nico is safe. When I look around, I see Galen's eyes clearly through the glow, and I reach out to him.

The ugly scraping sound cuts through again, dragging me towards consciousness. I know now I can't hold on to this bliss. And even if I do, it's still a dream I'll have to wake from, eventually.

Sleep falls away, and I blink my eyes open. The weird scraping has been joined by a sharp bang.

It's probably just a loose door caught in the wind.

Even though I tell myself it has to be mundane, my anxiety rises with every escalation of the sound. I'm about to wake Galen when he grumbles and sits up, rubbing his head.

"What the hell is that noise?" he asks.

"I don't know," I reply. "I've been wondering that myself."

"How long has it been going on?"

“A few minutes, I think. I’m not sure.”

“I’m going to have a look. Go and check on Nico.”

Nodding, I jump out of bed and grab my robe, hurrying down the hall. Galen heads towards the kitchen and the back door.

When I look in on Nico, he’s peacefully asleep, his blanket wrapped around him and a little stuffed dinosaur in his arms. With his long lashes resting on his cheeks and tousled hair falling across his forehead, he looks like a little angel all tuckered out from doing good deeds.

I shut his door quietly and go down the hall to the kitchen. I find Galen at the back door, peering through the window.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I saw someone moving around the garden shed. I think there’s more than one of them, so I’m trying to get an idea of how many before I bust out there.”

“Good thinking,” I say. “I don’t want you getting hurt.”

Galen snorts softly with amusement. “I could take ten of them easily by myself. My worry is that if I get out there and catch one of them, the others will run, and I won’t find out what they’re up to.”

“Okay,” I answer. “That makes sense.”

I’m standing so close to Galen, I can feel the heat rising from his skin. He’s only wearing loose pajama pants, and my eyes keep darting over to linger on his muscular chest, sculpted arms, and broad shoulders.

Watching him take out ten enemy wolves would be quite a thing to see.

Stop it!

We hear the scraping noise again, and Galen points. “There, see? It’s the garden shed door. Someone left it unlatched, and I just saw someone go past.”

I shudder. “What are we going to do?”

“In a minute, I’ll go out. I think I’ve got a pretty good idea where they are, and I can corner them.”

We watch for a couple more minutes, and I still can’t stop myself from looking at Galen.

Getting close to him is a mistake. Even if he does want to be with me, it’s out of duty, not love, and there’s a part of me that just can’t be convinced.

I take a step back to put some distance between our bodies. My head and my heart might be steadfast in keeping space between us, but my body still hasn’t gotten the message.

“Okay,” Galen says. “I’m going out. Stay right here and get ready to call for help.”

“You got it,” I say quickly, grabbing my phone.

Galen opens the door silently, then slips out, staying close to the side of the house until he gets close to the bushes that line the yard. He drops out of my sight as he rounds the far corner and runs towards the back of the shed.

The door scrapes and bangs again, making me jump. I’ve barely recovered from the

fright when growls and barks erupt from behind the shed. I take two steps forward, desperate to find out what's happening, but terrified to leave the safety of the house.

I have to stay here for Nico, and to call for help if Galen's injured. But I have no idea what's going on back there.

Then I hear a series of sharp yelps, and Galen herds two wolves into the yard. He shifts back to his human shape and points at the two small wolves.

"Change now and identify yourselves. I don't know you, which means you're intruders on my territory. You've got exactly five seconds to explain why you're on my personal property before I tear you apart."

The two wolves shift into males who look very young, maybe even still teenagers. Both of them also look a little rough, as if they've been on the run.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Galen demands.

"I'm real sorry," the dark-haired one answers. "I was snooping around looking for stuff I could use to make a fire, or other tools. We've been living rough for a while, and I didn't mean any harm."

"Yeah," the other one says. "I'm sorry, too. We shouldn't have been hanging around your place or stealing."

I frown and cock my head to the side slightly, put off by their tone.

They just don't sound sincere.

One of them glances at me, and I see a quick grin before he hides it behind an innocent expression and looks back at Galen.

Did I really see that?

The kids are still making protests, and Galen waves his hands at them. “Okay, okay. How many of you are there? I heard a few running off when I pounced. Great loyalty there from your pals.”

“They’re just scared,” the dark-haired one says, standing up. “I’m Dan, and I’m the leader, kind of. I’m sorry, and I really mean it. I shouldn’t have been snooping around. But since we’re here, I’d like to ask if we can camp on your territory.”

Galen stares at him. “How many of you are there?” he asks again.

“Four,” Dan says. “Sorry. Me and my pal Benny here, and Shawn and Jace, who ran away when you came. That’s it, I swear.”

Galen lets out a deep breath. “Look, I’ll let you camp, but over my boundary. I’m going to want some more information from you, especially if you want to stay for an extended period of time. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Dan says. “Thank you so much.”

“No more stealing,” Galen warns firmly.

Dan nods sheepishly. “It’s okay. We have a little cash and supplies. It’s just easier to lift stuff if you can.”

“I’m sure it is,” Galen says, his tone hard. “Get out of here.”

Dan helps Benny to his feet, and they run into the woods. I watch them go, my heart pounding right up into my throat.

“Was that wise, Galen?” I ask him. “They look like trouble.”

“I know they do,” he answers, leading me back to the house. “Don’t worry, I’m going to fully check them out. I want you and Nico in town first, though. If Nico’s at school and you’re in a public place, I know you’re safe. I can’t leave you here and go running around looking for these clowns.”

“Okay,” I say. “They really didn’t seem to be telling the truth.”

“I agree,” Galen says. “If they wanted to steal some stuff, I think they could have done it a bit quicker. I got the feeling they were looking for something.”

Chills run through my lower back and belly. “It’s very scary having them in our backyard,” I mutter, wrapping my arms around myself.

“I’m going to take care of it,” Galen says. “Get Nico ready for school, and we’ll head into town. Then I’ll get started checking these guys out.”

After we’re all up and dressed, we take Nico to the town bakery for breakfast. He’s all smiles and enthusiasm as we eat together and runs off to school with a big wave to both of us.

“He looks great,” Galen says, smiling. “He’s finally sleeping well and focusing on his schoolwork.”

“I know,” I answer, my chest glowing with pride. “Since we started helping him with his magic, everything is falling into place.”

I look over at Galen, and he’s watching me with a soft look in his eyes. He lifts a hand as if he wants to reach for mine, but takes it back at the last second.

There's still so much space between us, and I can't cross it. No matter how hard it is for me to hold back, the pain of giving in would be far worse.

"Okay, I'm going to pass on news of this incident and get some backup, as well as a couple of other things I've got lined up for the day," Galen says. "Where should I take you?"

"Grocery store, please," I answer, relieved to be on a neutral topic. We chat about food and household items we need, and my anxiety settles a little.

While I'm shopping, I find myself choosing things I know Galen likes. I'm surprised at myself that I even noticed his favorites, but the idea of making him happy excites me.

Careful.

My inner voice warns me, as it always does, but the draw of doing something nice for Galen doesn't go away. I fill my cart and go through the register, setting my stuff up for a delivery later. I leave the shop with only one small bag and head down the street, thinking about getting a coffee while I wait for Galen.

I'm knocked right out of my thoughts when someone runs into me. I almost lose my bag and grip the paper sack as I stagger away, trying to stay upright.

"Hey, I'm real sorry! Gee, I totally didn't mean to do that."

"Hello," I say warily, remembering the shifter from this morning. "Dan, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," he replies. "I didn't catch your name?"

He grins at me, and it's just a little creepy. There is a hard sheen to his cool blue eyes,

and I get the feeling he's toying with me.

"Clara," I answer. "And you met my husband, Galen. He's the alpha."

"Yes, yes, he is," Dan agrees. "And you are a wolf, correct?"

He tilts his head slightly and narrows his eyes. I feel a flicker of fear in my ribs, making my heart pound and sweat break out on my brow.

It's like he knows.

"Technically, yes," I answer, keeping my voice even. I deliberately end the sentence there, refusing to give him any more information.

"Any witches in this town?" he asks, a little too casually.

"No," I answer firmly. "Well, not that I know of."

"Interesting," Dan says. "Really interesting little town. It was good of your mate to let us stay."

"Yes, it was," I reply. "But he hasn't decided you can stay indefinitely, so be careful."

"Of course," he says very politely. "We certainly will."

"Good," I mutter, going around him. "Bye."

As I hurry down the street, his words stick in my mind.

It's really silly, but I can't help feeling like he knew I had no shifter gene... and witch

blood is in me, as well as my son.

When I finally slow down, I realize I've wandered into the outer edges away from the main street of town. Muttering softly with frustration, I take a side alley that will lead me back there, trying to ignore how empty the place feels.

As I reach the corner, I hear footsteps behind me. Nearly tripping over the gutter, I hurry into the narrow street, jogging a little to get to the next crossway.

The footsteps behind me get louder, but when I look behind me, I can't see anyone. That scares me more than anything, and I break into a hard run.

As soon as I turn my back, I hear the footsteps again. I'm too afraid to look back now, and just put all my effort into running. I lose the groceries as I charge around a sharp bend, the paper sack falling out of my hands and sending apples rolling across the street.

It's hard to draw a breath, my chest is so tight, but my feet don't fail me. I keep running towards the end of the street, sure that there's a turn at the end that will lead me straight back to town. When I get there, I almost scream in frustration when I find the only way through is blocked by a tall wire fence.

As the footsteps get louder and faster, I consider climbing it, but I know that even if I made it to the top, I'd get cut to shreds by razor wire. Gulping, I turn to face my stalker.

"Clara?" the voice floats around the corner, echoing around the stony walls. My lip trembles, and my hands shake, but I stand my ground as the man comes into view, fully blocking my path.

"Clara, are you alright?"

The voice!

“Galen?” I ask, taking a couple of steps forward.

“Yes, Clara, it’s me! What the hell is going on?”

“I thought someone was following me!” I cry, throwing my arms around him without even realizing what I’m doing.

“Someone was,” Galen chuckles. “Me.”

“Yeah,” I laugh, stepping away from him. “I guess you were.”

“What happened?” he asks.

“I had a weird encounter with that Dan guy,” I say. “Then I took a wrong turn, ended up down here, and when I heard your footsteps, I thought he was after me.”

“Why would you think that?” Galen asks, his voice low. “Did he try to hurt you?”

“No, nothing like that,” I reassure him. “It was just a weird conversation. Nothing threatening at all.”

“Okay, good. I haven’t had a chance to check them out yet—I had a meeting with Kit.”

“Oh,” I say. “He’s in town?”

“Yeah, just for the day. Had a few things to discuss. Don’t worry, I’ll look into these kids soon and find out what they’re doing.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure it’s nothing. I feel stupid getting so scared and running off when it was only you chasing me.”

Galen smiles, stroking my hair.

“I’ve always been chasing you, Clara. You don’t need to be scared anymore—I can protect you from anything.”

Except yourself.

“Thank you, Galen,” I answer. He opens his arms and I let him hug me, enjoying a moment of complete bliss snuggled against his warm chest with his heartbeat throbbing against my cheek.

“I’d like to take you out on a date tonight,” Galen says. “What do you say?”

I pull back and look into his eyes. More and more, I’m feeling like I don’t ever want to leave his side. It’s beginning to erode my common sense, and it scares me.

But it doesn’t change the fact that I really do want to go out with him.

“I’d like to, but I don’t want to leave Nico for too long,” I answer. “He’s been doing so well over the last week, I think he needs us with him.”

“Then we’ll bring him along,” Galen says. “Let’s make it a group date, all three of us!”

“Okay,” I answer, unable to keep the giant smile off my face. “I can’t say no to that—you got me.”

Galen hugs me, and as I let myself sink into the warmth of his arms again, I know, he

really does have me, my heart, body, and soul—whether I’m ready to admit it or not.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

In the hours leading up to the date, I'm as nervous as if it's my very first one—ever. As I stand in front of the mirror fiddling with my shirt collar, I try to remember the last time I was this nervous, and I can't.

Not even leading the pack into hostile territory affects me this badly!

Of course, back in high school, I never took Clara on a date. I was too afraid someone would see us together and report it to my father. The other girls I asked out meant very little to me. I was never serious about a relationship, so there was no need for nerves.

And now I'm almost foaming at the mouth with anxiety. It looks like there's something that scares the big, bad wolf after all!

Even as I fiddle with my collar again, I know that my worst fear really isn't disappointing Clara.

It's losing her.

I step back from the mirror and check myself out. I'm wearing a casual black suit with a white dress shirt, unbuttoned at the top. I was considering a tie, but I want the date to be more low-key. The only problem is, at the last moment, I decided I wanted to dress to impress, so I ended up in a suit.

Running a hand through my hair, I turn to the side to make sure my jacket is falling straight. I consider changing it for a second, then I berate myself.

I'll be late if I keep screwing around, and I don't think I'm going to be satisfied with how I look, no matter how long I stand here.

I grab my keys and phone, then go out to wait in front of the house. I told Clara and Nico to be ready at eight, and the clock ticks over just as I stop by the car.

When I hear the front door opening, I turn around slowly, waiting for Clara to come into view. When she steps out onto the porch, I'm mesmerized—there's no other word for it.

She's wearing a fitted black velvet dress with long sleeves and a V-shaped neckline, covered by a warm wool jacket in pale grey. Her dark brown hair is swept up behind her head, showing off her graceful neck and shoulders.

She moves towards me, the front porch light shimmering over her head and creating a soft, warm glow around her silhouette. My heart almost stops in my chest as I watch her walk towards me.

She truly is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

"Hey, Dad!" Nico yells, tearing around his mother and running towards me. "Mom said you had a fun night planned—where are we going?"

"Nothing too fancy, I hope," Clara says, looking me up and down. "I wasn't expecting you to be in a suit."

"I wouldn't worry about it," I answer. "You look positively breathtaking."

Clara ducks her head and blushes a little.

"Well, I wasn't sure what to wear... this dress is nice enough for something formal

but also warm and comfortable, so it was an easy choice. I couldn't convince Nico to wear formal clothes, though."

Nico blows a raspberry and does a little lap around the car. He's wearing a smart turtleneck that looks a bit formal, but the effect is ruined by his casual jeans.

"It's okay, no one is going to look at us funny for breaking the dress code," I answer. Both Clara and Nico give me inquisitive looks.

"Come on, Dad, just tell us!" Nico pleads.

"Okay," I answer, laughing. "We're going to the observatory. I booked it just for us, so there won't be anyone else there."

"Wow!" Nico exclaims. "To see stars and stuff, with a big telescope?"

"You got it, kid."

"Let's go!" Nico yells, hurling himself into the back of the car.

"He's a bit excited, Clara says, laughing. "Since I told him about it earlier, he hasn't stopped talking about how Dad is taking us out."

"Good," I answer. "But I hope his mom is excited, too?"

"She sure is," Clara replies. "But now I feel a little overdressed."

"You look amazing," I whisper as I open the car door for her. "You are beautiful every day, but you wear that gown like a queen."

Clara's cheeks color up again, and she looks away shyly as I close the door, then go

over to the driver's side. Before I get into the car, I stretch my senses out to check for any irregularities in the area.

After listening for a minute and scenting the air, I'm satisfied that all is quiet. I did a little digging into the young wolves, and it looks like they're runaways, not originally from any pack in Wolfshade.

That's strange enough. I don't think we've ever had wolves just wander in.

I don't mention it to Clara because I don't want to worry her, and it seems the youngsters really aren't up to any trouble. They seem to be ready to move on already, and Sherman and Kyra promised to keep an eye on the situation tonight so I could enjoy my time with Clara.

The drive up to the observatory doesn't take long, and we get to see the scattered lights of Quartz Key twinkling beneath us as we head up to the rim of the canyon. Dark shadows of mountains fall away behind us as I drive out onto the outcrop where the massive telescope is mounted.

When we arrive, Frankie and Gemma are waiting for me at the front door.

"Hello, Galen," Gemma says, taking my hands and kissing my cheek. "How is your mother?"

"She's well. Taking a break from the pack business lately."

"Good to hear it. This must be your mate, and your son?"

Gemma leans down to greet Nico, and I introduce Clara to Frankie.

"These are the town weirdos," I say, with a straight face and a serious tone. "They

live out here all alone, and rarely come to town. No one knows what they get up to out here, but there are whispers.”

Frankie chuckles. “Yeah, peace, quiet, all the stars in the sky, and the woman I love. Why would I ever leave this peak?”

“Sounds like I should have visited the observatory at some point while I was growing up,” Clara mutters. “Looks as if it might have been exactly what I needed.”

“You’d have been most welcome, sweet girl,” Gemma says. “We hold public events a few times a year and often open up for private visits, like tonight, but the door’s always open to someone who just wants to gaze at the sky for a bit.”

“I wish I’d met you sooner,” Clara says with a wide smile.

Gemma grins and squeezes Clara’s hand. “It’s alright—now we have all the time in the world to catch up!” Gemma answers, laughing. “Bring your young man up anytime you like, or just stop in on us for a cup of tea. You’re more than welcome.”

“Here she goes again,” Frankie mutters. “If you keep inviting people up here, I’m filing for divorce.”

“As if you could,” Gemma replies, teasing him. “Where would you live, and who would make your favorite ginger nut biscuits for you?”

“Got me again,” Frankie hangs his head woefully. “I’m trapped. Trapped, I tell you! The woman is keeping me a prisoner here.”

“Didn’t you just say you didn’t want to leave?” Clara asks, giggling.

“He’s getting old,” Gemma whispers, making a circling motion beside her temple.

“Feeble. It’s very sad, really.”

“That’s it, woman!” Frankie announces, going over to Gemma and wrapping his hands around her waist before dipping her. “You’re going to be subjected to the horrendous torture of kisses and dancing under starlight until you learn your place!”

“Oh, no,” Gemma murmurs, relaxing in his arms. “How shall I cope?”

Frankie bends down and kisses her gently, and the two of them snuggle together as they begin to sway back and forth.

“We’ve been dismissed,” I say to Clara. “They’ve dropped out of reality now, and there’s no telling when they’ll come back.”

We leave Frankie and Gemma giggling and dancing in the garden and head inside. As much as I enjoy watching their antics, it’s left me feeling hollow.

Now I know that’s exactly what I want... with Clara. I don’t just want to be friends with her—I want her heart.

When we enter the main room, there is a table laid out with cakes, biscuits, soft drinks and coffee. Nico hurries over excitedly and loads up a plate.

“That’s an awful lot of sugar, young man,” Clara says.

“Since when are you worried about sugar?” Nico replies.

“Never. I want you to save me some.”

We all get some sweet treats and go and sit down under the main window. The view of the stars is unparalleled, with glittering trails swirling from one end of the sky to

the other.

I watch Clara eat her cake, breaking off small pieces with her fingers and popping them into her mouth. The idea of tasting her lips when they're smeared in cinnamon and honey makes heat rise in me, and I have to look away.

"Do you know the stars, Dad?" Nico asks.

"No, Nico, I don't. There's a leaflet here, and a poster for you to take home, as well. Let's see which ones you can pick out, then we'll go and look through the big telescope."

"Cool! I've never looked through a telescope before. One of the kids at my old school had one, but he never showed it to me."

"Well, this one's a bit different. You'll be able to see everything with it. Gemma and Frankie are very serious about their study of the sky."

While Nico and I finish our cake, I go through the leaflet with him, pointing out the stars we can see with the naked eye. When I look over at Clara, she's watching us with a soft expression. I smile at her, and when she smiles back, I feel something deep connect between us.

We both love Nico, and she knows that. She's happy for me to be in his life, and maybe, if I can prove to her I'm a good father, she'll think about letting me back into her heart.

When our cake and soda are all finished, I take Clara and Nico into the next room, where the giant telescope is aimed at the sky. Nico shouts with enthusiasm and jumps into the big chair under it, fiddling with the controls.

“Hang on there, kiddo,” I say, laughing. “You won’t get anywhere if you just spin around randomly. Here, Gemma and Frankie have left some coordinates for us to look at.”

I show Nico how to move the telescope, and he starts looking up at the celestial clusters the others recommended to us. His bouncy excitement soon gives way to wide-eyed wonder as he gets a close-up look at stars, planets, comets and constellations.

“Nico is loving this,” Clara says. “Thank you, Galen.”

“I hope his mom is loving it, too?” I ask, gently taking her hand. She nods and smiles, but tactfully takes her hand back.

While Nico explores the sky, I take Clara over to a smaller one in the corner of the room. I adjust it carefully, then ask her to take a look.

“It’s pretty,” she says, her eye fixed on the lens. “What is it?”

“It’s a lesser-known binary formation,” I answer. “Two silver stars caught in each other’s gravity, spinning for eternity.”

Clara stands up, giving me an intense look. Before I can expand upon the moment, Nico calls us over to see a close-up of the rings on Saturn.

Even though I feel I missed a romantic moment, I’m always happy to spend more time with Nico. His enthusiasm gives me an incredibly warm, accomplished feeling, more fulfilling than anything I’ve ever known.

This is what it means to be a father. To admire my son, to help him grow.

A dark mood threatens to take me as the thought slips into my head that I may never have met Nico if it wasn't for Iris Porter. I push the frustration and fear away, comforting myself that I have Nico with me now, and that's all that matters.

And I have Clara by my side, too... just not as I'd hoped. How I wish I could take back my stupid, foolish actions—tell my old man right to his face what I think of him! All I can do is keep trying to convince Clara that she's all I ever wanted.

When Nico starts to yawn, we decide to take him home, promising he can come back any time he likes. We wave goodbye to Gemma and Frankie, who are still happily dancing under the stars.

They are so lucky to have each other. If I can have anything close to that with Clara, I'll call myself a happy man.

By the time we get back to town, Nico is already asleep. When we get home, I carry him inside and tuck him into bed, giving him a kiss goodnight before I move aside for Clara to do the same.

“Would you like to have a drink with me?” I ask as she closes Nico's door behind her on the way out. “Or just straight to bed?”

“I'd love a drink, thank you, Galen. What are we having?”

“You can have whatever you like, but my choice was going to be sweet brandy.”

“Bring it on,” she says, smiling.

When she takes my hand and leads me out to the living room, my hopes soar. All I want is a chance to be close to her and talk. I'm determined to respect her boundaries and not let anything get sexual again, unless I'm sure she really wants it.

As we sit down, I pour two nips and give Clara a glass. She sighs with pleasure as she takes her first sip.

“This is good stuff.”

“Family recipe, actually. It started with my great-grandfather, and there’s a distillery outside of town.”

Clara nods in response, taking another sip.

“I want to thank you for tonight, Galen. Nico had such an amazing time. It was really thoughtful of you, and a great outing for him.”

“You had fun, too, I hope?”

“I sure did,” she says, smiling. “One of the most romantic things I’ve ever done.”

I knock back half my glass, feeling the burn of the brandy against the back of my throat.

“I’m glad,” I answer, not knowing what else to say. “I want you to know, anything you need, just name it, and it’s yours.”

Clara looks at me, her beautiful golden eyes very dark in the dim light. When she smiles, it feels to me like a gulp of air to a drowning man.

“Thank you, Galen. But now that Nico is doing better, I’ve pretty much got everything I need. I didn’t come here for anything else.”

Her words wound me a little. I feel like she’s telling me straight out that my dates and promises aren’t going to work, and she’s not going to change her mind.

That doesn't mean I'll stop trying!

"Okay," I answer, trying to keep my voice even. "I understand. That's why it's important for you to ever tell me if you need something. I won't intrude on your privacy or pry. I've done enough terrible things to you, so many that I can't even apologize for them all—but dammit, Clara, I'm going to try!"

"Galen," she says, leaning forward to stroke my cheek, "you don't have to keep apologizing."

"While I can still see that hurt deep in your eyes, yes, I do."

"I didn't realize I was walking around looking so wounded."

"You don't," I answer, cupping her jaw and looking into her eyes. "But I can see it, because I'm the one who put it there."

"Oh, Galen," she shakes her head, putting her hands on my chest. At first, I think she's going to push me away, but then she puts her arms around my waist and snuggles against me.

"Just hold me, Galen. That's all I need for now."

"Okay," I answer, wrapping my arms around her. "That I can do."

Now and forever, my love. I'll hold you until the end of time.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

When warm sunlight caresses my cheek and I feel softness all around me, I don't know where I am. I stretch a little, trying to turn over, and that's when I feel Galen pressed up against me.

I turn to look at him, amazed that we're curled up together in bed. I'm still in my velvet dress, and even though there's a soft blanket over us, we're still on top of the covers.

He must have carried me in here when I fell asleep.

I wait for the inevitable rush of fear, and to my surprise, it never comes. I watch Galen's face as the light filtering into the room gets brighter, thin rays that angle through the curtains to pick out the shine in his dark blonde hair.

A moment of hurt wells inside me as memories from the past fall through my mind like pieces of broken glass. We woke up together a couple of times, but Galen was always so careful not to stay too long with me. He was too afraid of his family finding out.

And I took that. Instead of telling him I was worth more, I let it slide. I have guilt in this, too—I should have told him it was unacceptable and made him come clean.

But with that realization comes a swelling wave of even greater pain. It sweeps through me, engulfing me in self-blame and sorrow.

I couldn't do it! I loved him so much, I wouldn't dare put our relationship at risk. That's why I'm so angry and afraid—because I did that to myself!

For the first time in my life, I let these feelings come. I examine them as they flow through my mind and my heart, and instead of hurting me, I feel soothed as if I'm finally treating the wound instead of ignoring it, or worse, denying its existence.

All those nights, I cried and raged, blaming him, telling myself I hated him—when I hated myself. I never stopped loving Galen.

Watching him sleep beside me, the emotions are painfully clear. He reminds me so much of Nico while he's sleeping—the same tangle of dark golden hair across the brow, the long lashes falling gently on his cheeks, and the curved lips that look ready to smile up at me with love.

Tears prick at my eyes, and even though my eyes well up, I don't let them flow. I wriggle a little in Galen's arms, feeling his warm chest against me. Some instinct in me, a learned response, is telling me to run, but I'm having a problem with that for the first time.

I don't want to.

I want to stay curled up in his arms forever. I feel so safe and so loved. All those years struggling alone, determined to make it work and be strong for my son... the last few weeks have been bliss, if I could just let myself accept it.

I glance back at Galen's face, wanting to enjoy the relaxed, peaceful look again, but a shock crackles through me as I realize his eyes are open.

I jump in his arms, a tremor running through me. My heart hammers up into my throat, making me dizzy as my breath catches in my throat.

"I'm sorry, Clara," he says, letting go of me. "I must have curled up with you after I fell asleep. I didn't mean anything by it."

I watch him roll away from me, and the loss that rips through me is more than I can bear. I reach out and grab his hand, rolling towards him.

“No, Galen. Don’t let me go.”

The joy that breaks across his face is like nothing I’ve ever seen before. Even the tender moments he’s shared with Nico recently don’t even come close. I knew that being the big, bad wolf was just a show as the alpha, but in this moment, I realize how vulnerable he really is.

As he pulls me against his chest, I tilt my head up toward his lips. When his mouth touches mine, a shiver runs through him, and it’s so powerful his hands tremble.

I deepen the kiss, searching for his tongue and running my hands over his body. He’s still wearing the silk shirt, and the soft feel of it against my hands and his hard muscles underneath heighten the intensity.

“Clara,” Galen gasps, pulling back. “I don’t want you to make a mistake. I understand how you feel, and I only want you to do this if it’s what you really want.”

“Galen,” I whisper, kissing him softly. “I want you. I always have, and I always will. Am I sure about what will come of this? No, I have no idea. The only thing I know right now is that I want you, and I want this.”

I reach down and stroke the hard mound of him beneath his trousers, and he makes a strangled sound, like a man drowning. I press my lips to his and kiss him hard, as if my breath can bring him back to life.

Galen groans as he wraps his hands around my waist, pulling me against his body and reaching down to grab my ass. I moan into his mouth, writhing against him and urging him on.

I run my fingers down his chest, undoing the buttons and stroking his firm muscles and soft skin around the silken fabric of the shirt. The mixture of sensations causes a warm rush through me, and a deep ache starts to throb between my legs.

When I look up at Galen, his eyes catch the morning sun and shimmer in a pure, deep, emerald green. The look of wonder on his face is ravenous hunger, combined with dumbstruck awe.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers. “I missed you so much.”

Tears burn my eyes as I nod, feeling all those nights of tender intimacy flooding back to me. So many moments in his arms, looking into his eyes and feeling the warmth of his kiss.

“I missed you, too,” I murmur, stretching up to kiss him. His tongue searches for mine. His lips are so hot and eager, I feel like he is trying to eat me alive.

He was always very good at that.

Galen strokes my shoulders, teasing at the edges of the dress. I reach up and grab the velvet collar, rolling the dress down to my waist while Galen watches with wide eyes.

The lust on his face gives me confidence, and when I lie back to take off the bra, I do it slowly, unhooking it, then teasing the straps down my shoulders and stroking my breasts with my fingers as I lift off the cups.

Galen falls on me, pinning me by the waist as his mouth goes straight to my nipples. He grips my breasts in his big hands, squeezing them and rubbing the nipples with his thumbs as his tongue and lips make wet trails across them.

I wrap my hands around his head and push my chest towards him, making him moan

as he reaches around to squeeze my ass. I writhe under him, the throbbing between my legs becoming a burning, fiery ache.

A sharp growl rips from Galen's mouth as he dives down, shoving the skirt up my thighs. I open my legs, gasping with need and encouraging him. I feel his fingers rub me gently through my panties before he pulls them off, and then I feel his tongue on my clit.

I throw my head back, thrusting my hips at him. Galen moans, grabbing my ass and lapping at my pussy, from my clit all the way down to my throbbing slit. I'm so wet I can feel it running through my hot crevices, swiftly followed by Galen's eager tongue as he licks up all my juice.

Galen wraps one arm firmly around me, hooking the other under one knee as he holds my legs open. He uses the tip of his tongue to tease my clit, then drags his tongue down in feather-light touches, until he finally reaches my pussy and dives in with his mouth open, devouring me.

A wailing cry tries to escape from my mouth, but I hold it in, not wanting to wake Nico. I have to cover my face with my hands and shake my head back and forth to stop my cries of pleasure as a massive orgasm crests through me, leaving tingling lines of goosebumps all over my body.

When I finally get my breath back, I look up. Galen is kneeling between my legs, his muscular chest and stomach framed by the edges of the white silk shirt. He reaches down and opens his pants, and when his huge, hard cock comes into view, all thought is wiped from my mind.

A creature of pure hunger and need, I lunge forward, barely aware of my own actions. I wrap my hands around his cock and tease him with my hands, stroking him and squeezing, alternating with long, slow strokes. Galen shudders above me, holding in

his cries and getting harder by the second as I tease his cock.

When he groans and almost falls against me, I look up to see his face twisted with desperate desire. His green eyes are shimmering, and his mouth is a thin, red line as he tries to draw a decent breath.

“Please, Clara,” he begs. “I can’t take much more.”

I smile up at him, still stroking his cock with one hand as I run my fingers across his chest. I sit up a bit higher, grabbing his shoulder as I come up for a kiss.

He bends down, and our lips touch, hot, wet, and slick. I feel his tongue, and I reach out with my own, desperate to feel him. The ache between my legs throbs with fierce intensity, and I throw myself back on the bed.

“Fuck me, Galen!” I pant. “Fuck me right now!”

He falls forward, catching himself on his hands and reaching down to grab his cock. He teases the lips of my pussy by stroking the hard, hot head against the slick, throbbing lips, making me squirm and gasp.

I’m shivering and murmuring nonsense by the time he puts his cock against the opening of my pussy, pressing forward with his hips. Even though I go wild, thrashing and thrusting and trying to slam him inside me, Galen holds back, penetrating me slowly, inch by delicious inch.

When he slides all the way home, he wraps his arms around me, crushing me to his chest. I wrap my arms and legs around him, gasping with pleasure as our bodies lock together.

Galen turns his head, grazing my ear with his lips, and I feel his breath across my

cheek.

“I love you, Clara,” he whispers. “I always have, and I always will.”

The words shock through my haze of lust, and my body freezes as shock runs through me. It only lasts for a second, as my desire for Galen is so strong, the needs of my body far outweigh any emotional entanglements.

It's the moment. It's just the heat of the moment, and nothing more.

Galen gets a tighter grip on my shoulders and starts to thrust. First, he uses slow strokes, piercing me until I can feel it all the way from my slick outer lips to the throbbing of my cervix deep inside.

The slow strokes bring me up to another orgasm, and I thrash against him, digging my nails into his back as my body writhes against his, pinned against the mattress. Then Galen lets out a low groan that sounds like a guttural roar and starts pounding me as hard as he can.

The waves of pleasure are coming so fast I can't process them. All I can do is ride it, my inner core exploding with orgasm after orgasm. I feel Galen's cock get thicker and harder inside me as he moans into my ear, every breath becoming more ragged and desperate as he approaches his climax.

“I love you!” he gasps into my ear, and it sounds like a prayer more than a confession. I wrap my arms around him, cradling his head with my hand as I press my cheek to his. When his cock gets even thicker and harder, jerking and throbbing inside me, I feel my inner muscles clenching and spasming as his climax sparks another orgasm from me.

Chest heaving, gasping for breath, we stay locked together for what feels like an

eternity, feeling the magic of our bodies meshed together. When Galen rolls off me and hugs me to his chest, I start to feel reality returning, and I wonder what I've done.

This was the most intense and emotional sex we've ever had—but how do I know it was real? He betrayed me once before, and he could do it again. I've heard him say 'I love you' before, and it didn't save me then, so why should it reassure me now?

"Clara," Galen says softly. He pulls back a little, cupping my cheek and looking into my face. His eyes are huge, glowing with the intensity of an evergreen forest.

"I love you," he says. "I mean this with my entire heart and soul. I love you, and I want to hold you forever."

Tears fill my eyes, but I snuggle against Galen's chest before they can start to streak down my cheeks. I cling to him, wrapping my arms tightly around his waist so I don't have to look at his face while I process these emotions.

This is not like before... he means it, really, actually means it, this time.

But does that mean my heart will be safe?

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

Days go by, and even though Clara doesn't return my declaration, she is obviously more comfortable with me, and it's more than I could have ever hoped for.

I don't want her to say it unless she truly feels it, and it's an honest expression of how she feels now, not tangled up in the loss and longing from our past.

We settle into a comfortable routine of eating breakfast together in the morning, taking Nico to school, going our separate ways during the day, before picking up Nico and spending time with him exercising his powers before we go home to make dinner. It's so comfortable and blissful, I could almost believe that it's real.

But it's not. Not until she can look at me with love, and no fear in her heart.

I try to get Clara involved in some pack business, mostly just so I can spend more time with her, but she isn't comfortable with the older, more judgmental members, and I don't blame her at all.

Especially since I want her around to distract me from their mundane bullshit. How did my father even deal with this on a daily basis?

I hate it, but the answer is obvious. Father created drama, sending out patrols, strengthening our border, and attempting to take territory outside our own. The pack was so caught up with the action, they didn't have time to bicker, and even though it's tempting to do the same, I'd rather focus on building community.

And Clara is the key. If she can bring the pack together in balance, all our rifts will be healed.

She attended a few meetings, and even though there is no outright hostility, which I wouldn't tolerate—she still finds it difficult, and I love her too much to insist she do something she isn't comfortable with. While I continue to navigate the ongoing issues, Clara hangs out with Winnie and takes up some of her old hobbies, like sewing and cooking.

Every day, she looks happier and more relaxed, and my hope soars, even as I tell myself not to assume anything.

Early one Saturday morning, I get up with Nico and head straight out for a run. We shift and race through the forest, bounding and playing together until he's panting with exertion. I've found that tiring out his wolf is essential to him being able to focus on his magic and stay calm during school.

"Jeez, Dad," Nico gasps as we shift back to our human shapes in the back garden. "That was a hell of a run for first thing in the morning!"

"I didn't hear you complaining," I answer, tapping him on the shoulder with a mock punch. "Not until it was time to turn around and come home, anyway."

"My paws get sore," he answers. "I love the running, but then my paws start to hurt, and I can't draw a breath."

"That will get better the more you shift," I reply. "Your paws need to get harder and develop calluses, and your lungs will get stronger, too. We have to introduce some hunting soon, and when you're on the chase for prey, your body will harden up more naturally. You won't notice the pain when you're hunting. All you'll think about is the kill."

"That scares me, Dad," Nico admits. "After that day in the valley—"

“That was not your fault!” I say, stopping him and looking into his eyes. “That’s on me. We should never have left you alone in such a vulnerable state. I’m sorry you had to go through that, son.”

Nico gulps and throws his arms around me. I hold him against my chest, closing my eyes to draw in his scent. Having my son close to me is just pure magic—soothing for both my human soul and that of my wolf.

I ruffle Nico’s hair, wishing that I could shield him from all harm and berating myself for letting that incident occur. I had to send a significant amount of money to the affected farmer, but that didn’t bother me.

The only thing that matters is that I put my son in danger, and I need to make sure that never happens again.

We head inside, and I throw a robe around Nico’s shoulders as we go into the kitchen. To my surprise, Clara is awake, humming to herself as she twirls around the kitchen.

“Good morning,” I say, smiling when she pauses and smiles back at me, my heart soars.

Careful. One smile doesn’t mean she’s in love... although the way her eyes are eating up my naked body is a really good sign.

“Good morning, Galen,” Clara answers, quickly looking away into the frying pan. “I saw you boys out for a run and thought I’d have breakfast ready for you when you got back.”

“I appreciate it,” I reply, putting on one of the robes I keep by the door. I roll it slowly up my shoulders and take my time wrapping it around me and tying the sash. I

get another little ego boost when Clara's eyes linger on me again.

"What are we having, Mom?" Nico asks, sitting down at the table.

"I've got pancakes and corn biscuits, as well as sausage and eggs. Do you want some of everything, baby?"

"Yes, please, Mom!" Nico exclaims, picking up his knife and fork and drumming them on the table. "Your cooking has been so good!"

"Thanks, baby," Clara says, laughing. "I didn't have much time to cook when we lived out at West Glacier, I was always working. But now I can take the time to indulge my passion for cooking, expect a lot more of it!"

"No complaints here," I reply, going over to the counter. "Do you need any help?"

"Not at all," Clara says. "I'm almost done. Go ahead and sit down, and I'll bring it over."

When she sets the trays down, the room is silent except for the scraping of cutlery on plates for a good ten minutes. Nico and I inhale a full plate each before piling up for seconds.

"Glad you guys were hungry!" Clara laughs. "I thought I made too much."

"Nico will need excess amounts of protein for a while," I reply. "He's growing fast, and his wolf is very strong. It will help settle his mind and make the shifting much easier if he has high energy levels. He will have to hunt for prey soon to get the amount of nutrients he needs, too."

"Hunt?" Clara echoes. I can see she's worried about the day he lost control, and I pat

her hand gently.

“Don’t worry. I’m going to be there the whole time. He needs a little guidance, that’s all. I screwed up before, and I should have taken him out to test his skills before it crept up on him like that.”

Clara nods, with worry still lurking in her eyes.

“You sure you’re feeling up to this, kiddo?” Clara asks. Nico nods, shoveling a huge bite of pancakes into his mouth.

“It’s scary,” he answers. “But I trust Dad. So far, every outing makes me stronger, and my mind is clearer.”

“Okay,” Clara says, leaning over to kiss his forehead. “If you’re okay, then that’s all that matters.”

For a few moments, I just watch my wife and child, wondering how I got so lucky. Not just to have them, but that I was able to find them, even after I stupidly let Clara go.

“I’m thinking of planning another date,” I say, breaking the silence. “Something for just the two of us. What do you think, Clara?”

“Don’t want me to come, huh?” Nico asks, grinning. “Trying to get rid of me already?”

“You stop,” I laugh, giving him a little shove. “I’ve got plenty of family activities planned, don’t you worry about that. I’d just like to spend a bit of time with your mom, too.”

“What are you up to?” Nico asks, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Well, I’ve decided I’m going to woo your mom—just like the old days. Showering her with gifts, taking her out to nice places, and just generally treating her like a queen.”

“You’re already married,” Nico laughs. “Isn’t that supposed to be done beforehand?”

“Yes, usually,” I answer. “But I didn’t get the chance, so I’m doing it now.”

“That sounds like a great idea, Dad,” Nico says, grinning. “Mom deserves the best!”

“Do I get a say in this?” Clara asks.

“No,” Nico and I answer in perfect unison. All of us laugh, and I’m so happy my chest aches.

This. This is all I want, for the rest of my life.

“What should we do today?” I ask. “There’s a craft show in town, so there will be some fun stalls, food, and games. Or we could hike up the mountain to one of the lookouts. I can give you a few pointers on tracking, son.”

“We can take a picnic,” Clara says. “And maybe find a spot over the lake?”

“Sounds great, Dad!” Nico says, grinning.

“We can stop in town on the way back for a nice dinner, too,” I answer. “Maybe have a family movie night after.”

Nico’s smile grows, and the love in his eyes is enough to almost knock me off my

chair.

“Thanks for coming to find us, Dad,” Nico says softly. “I knew you would, and it would be just like this.”

Clara looks up at him sharply as if he wounded her, but before anyone can react, a soft beep begins to emit from a speaker above the door.

“What is that?” Clara asks.

“Security breach,” I answer, leaping up from the table. I hurry to the panel and flick my hand across the screen to bring up the camera feed.

The first few slides show empty corners of my garden, but the last two show shifters I don’t know stalking into my property. They are still on the outskirts, so I have time to intervene.

They obviously don’t know I have heavy security, and I doubled it up after those drifters got in.

“What’s happening, Galen?” Clara asks, her voice high.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” I say, tapping a few buttons to call for backup. “I’ve got a few wolves stalking towards the house, but I can take them. I’ve sent messages to the others, just in case, but I’m going out to intercept right now.”

“Don’t leave us alone!” Clara cries.

“I won’t. I’m only going to the backyard, just a couple of feet away. If you need me, then holler, but I’m not going to just sit here and wait for them to kick the door in.”

I tear off my robe and walk out into the yard. I stay against the back of the house so they won't immediately see me when they come through from the woods and wait for the first one to come into view.

As the big, black wolf crawls through the low shrubs on his belly, I circle around the yard, catching him just as he sticks his head out. I get him in a sleeper hold before he can even see me coming and squeeze gently until he passes out in my arms.

Three to go.

Staying in my human shape, I run along the garden bed, keeping to the shadows as the next wolf enters the garden. With a swift kick, I slam my heel down on his skull, and he drops like a stone.

I'm getting into position for the next two when I realize they've changed course. I stand quietly, stretching out my senses so I can tell which way they're going.

Shit! They're headed for the back door!

With no time to waste, I shift into my wolf shape and bolt across the yard towards the back of the house. There is no point in being stealthy now, so I round the corner with teeth bared, ready for a fight.

What I see as I come into the yard makes my heart sink like a stone. The other two wolves have surrounded Nico, who is also in his wolf shape, spinning between them, snarling and snapping.

A howl rips from my throat as I attack, charging into the nearest wolf and knocking him off his feet. I go straight for his throat and rip open the jugular in one swift move. The wolf yips and kicks his legs a little as his life bleeds out on the ground.

I spin back around, blood dripping from my jaws as I fix my eyes on the other wolf. He's starting to back away, but that isn't going to save him.

Tried to take my son! I'll kill you!

A shudder runs through the other wolf as he flattens his ears and tries to spring away. I leap at him, crashing into his shoulder so hard we both roll across the ground, snapping at each other and growling as I try to grab his ruff.

The other wolf tries to slither away, but I manage to get on top and pin him to the ground. I can hear the pattering of paws all around me, and I know my pack has come. I glare into the other wolf's yellow eyes, enjoying the fear I see in them. He yelps and wriggles, trying to get away, but I have no mercy in me.

With one sharp jerk of my head, I rip open his throat. Blood sprays across my face, but I pay no attention to it as I spin around and shift, running towards Nico.

"Nico!"

"Dad!" my son screams, running to me and throwing his arms around me. I pick him up, spinning him around and holding him tightly against my chest.

"Oh my God, son," I pant. "I thought I lost you."

"I'm okay, Dad, I'm okay! It was really scary, but they didn't hurt me."

"Thank God."

"Galen," Sherman speaks from behind me. "We've cleared the area. Were there any others? It looks like we missed some."

“There were two others,” I say, putting Nico down and running to Sherman. “I knocked them out. Each on the west and south corners.”

“They aren’t there now, alpha.”

“Shit! They got away?”

“Looks like it.”

“Fuck!” I run a hand through my hair, berating myself for doing a poor job of this. They got too close, and now I can’t find out who they are, or why they’re here.

A faint trickle of unease runs through me. At first, I can’t place it, but then, while I’m looking at Nico, the realization hits me like a blow to the face.

Where’s Clara? Why isn’t she here comforting her son?

“No,” I mutter, turning to run towards the house. “No, no. This can’t be happening!”

I slam the back door open, hoping to see her standing by the counter, drawn, worried, but safe.

The kitchen is empty.

“Clara!” I scream, running through the house. Her scent is all around me, so thick that it feels like she must be here, somewhere, but all I find is empty space.

Finally, I run to the front door, looking out over the lawn. Pain and loss open up inside me, dropping me into a well of despair—and sparking a desperate, burning rage against those who would hurt my mate.

“What happened?” Sherman asks from behind me. “Are we secure?”

“No, we’re not,” I growl. “They took her. They took my mate. And now I’m going to kill every last one of them.”

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When Galen races from the kitchen, Nico is hot on his heels. I grab his arms, desperately trying to pull him back into the room.

“No, Mom, let me go! I have to help Dad!”

“Your father would want you to stay here with me, where it’s safe!”

“But he needs help!”

“Help is coming, Nico! The rest of the pack is on their way. The best thing you can do is wait here.”

Nico goes still in my arms, and I relax, sighing with relief. The second I let my guard down, Nico twists free of my hands and bolts out into the yard.

“Nico!” I scream, going after him. I barely make it to the doorway before someone grabs me from behind.

I struggle like crazy, trying to kick and punch, but the person is too strong. With one arm around my waist and the other on my throat, they drag me through the house and out the front door.

As we cross the front garden, I hear howling in the backyard and make a desperate struggle to get free. I feel a sharp blow across the back of my head, then everything goes black.

When I come to, I’m being carried on someone’s shoulder, jiggling up and down as

they jog through the woods. My hands are dangling down their back, and the person has a firm hold on my legs to keep me in place.

I gather my strength, then struggle for all I'm worth, trying to grab the guy around the head and claw at his eyes. He grunts and tries to drop me, but I go down kicking, trying to wound him in any way I can.

"Stop it!" he growls, throwing me to the ground. Even though it knocked the wind out of me, I try to get up and launch myself at him. At the last second, I see his big black boot coming at me and manage to throw myself backwards so it doesn't get me in the face.

I can't entirely avoid the hit, and his foot slams into my ribs. I roll across the ground, panting and shivering from the pain. When I hear his heavy footsteps behind me, I try to gather myself for another attack, but I can barely breathe, let alone move.

I hear the guy humming softly as he fumbles around, then grabs my hands and ties them together. His jaunty little tune reminds me of how I was humming to myself in the kitchen this morning.

So, a bit of kidnapping and assault is how this guy likes to start his morning on a good note. How can anyone be so casual when they're treating another human being like this?

He binds my wrists together, the thin rope brutally tight and digging into my flesh. I struggle again, and he completely ignores me, moving to my feet to tie them together.

I examine my kidnapper carefully, recording all the details for later.

Long, dark brown hair, kind of curly. Longish beard. Gray eyes. Dressed like a biker. Not from our pack. He must be one of the drifters.

My heart sinks as I realize Galen should have just run them out of the territory the first day he saw them, or at least questioned them about their motives.

What do they want with me? Is it a good sign that they didn't kill me?

The burly guy finishes with my ankles and picks me up like a sack of luggage. I thrash some more, finding my voice and screaming, even though it makes my ribs burn.

Probably cracked a few with that last kick. I don't care—not if it alerts the others to where I am!

The guy drops me in disgust and smacks me across the face. I hear a ripping sound as he tears his shirt, then he binds a filthy gag around my head. As he picks me up, a few drops of blood drop from my nose onto the ground.

That's all Galen needs to track me!

I go limp in the big guy's grip, tilting my head down so my blood drips regularly onto the ground. It's not enough for my kidnapper to notice, but it is more than enough for Galen to track me.

He's got to be on his way right now. All I have to do is hang on.

After a couple of miles, I begin to wonder how far we're going and what the plan is. The further we go, the harder it will be for Galen to find me.

And it looks like we are going into neighboring territory. Do they have a safe passage from other wolves?

Finally, my kidnapper begins to slow down, and I hear other men talking. The sounds

get louder, and we come into a small clearing where the guy tosses me to the ground like a sack of potatoes. My breath blasts out of me, and the pain streaking through my cracked ribs makes me choke on my gag.

“You got her! Good job.”

I recognize the voice, and sick fear rises in me.

Dan.

The weirdo who showed up in Galen’s yard and who approached me in town, making all sorts of strange comments.

What does he want with me?

“Yeah, it wasn’t easy. Benny and Jace both bit it—they went after the kid.”

Dan lets out a low whistle. “Both dead?”

“Yep.”

“Oh, well. More money for us, then,”

Both of them laugh. Their humor sickens me.

“It’s a shame we didn’t get the kid,” Dan says, crouching down beside me and grabbing my hair to turn my face up. “But this is the one we were told to get, anyway.”

“So, do you want to just kill her now?” the other guy asks.

Fear like nothing I've ever known floods through me, ice-cold waves of terror that make me feel sick enough to pass out. As my breathing speeds up and burns my throat, I start shivering violently.

You can't take me away from Nico!

Dan grins, showing his sharp teeth and glaring at me so hard, I can see the whites of his eyes. Along with the paralyzing terror, I feel a sick and horrible guilt.

I should have trusted my instincts and gone after him that day he ran into me in town. I should have told Galen to check them out and run them from the territory.

Dan yanks my head up further, exposing my throat and making me scream into the gag. Tears flow down my cheeks as all my emotions collide together, leaving me shivering in shock.

Galen, oh my God, Galen, I'm so sorry! I should have told you... I should have told you everything!

Now he'll never know how much I love him!

"I know that's what we're supposed to do, Shawn," Dan says, answering his friend's question. "But here's the thing. We got paid, right?"

"Half the money, yes. The other half comes when we can prove she's dead—and that the alpha knows it, too."

"Yeah. And now with Benny and Jace gone, the money looks quite a bit better, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. But what are you suggesting?"

“I think we should keep the little lady,” Dan says, running his finger up and down my neck. He’s still holding on to my hair, forcing my head back, and the pain is getting so intense, black clouds are crowding into my vision.

“Keep her?” Shawn asks. “Why?”

“Well, this guy paid a nice chunk of change for us to get her, and promised more on proof of her death. But how much do you think the rich alpha would pay to get her back?”

What guy?

Random moments connect in my mind, bringing me to a sick conclusion.

Kit... it has to be Kit!

“Yeah, right, Dan!” Shawn scoffs. “He’ll just fucking kill us! We’re two men down now as well. This is too risky.”

“I think we can persuade him,” Dan says, looking into my eyes. His finger slides down my throat, across my chest, and down to the neckline of my dress. “Besides, she’s a lot cuter than I thought she’d be. Seems a shame to waste a cutie like this. I’d like to have a little fun with her before we make any hard decisions.”

“You’re out of your fucking mind, Dan!” Shawn snaps. “Let’s just waste the bitch, go to the meetup point, and have our cash wired over. This job was a quick in-and-out, and now two of us are dead, and the fucking alpha is on our tail—and he’s pissed!”

“It’s a real shame you couldn’t get the kid,” Dan says, letting me go and standing up. “We could have jammed him up properly, then. He’d pay anything to get his son back—or the crusty old matriarch would, at least. They’re loaded, Shawn. We could

make twice the dough here. It would compensate for the loss of Benny and Jace.”

“That alpha is coming right now,” Shawn warns. “It won’t be that hard to track us, and he’ll have the whole pack with him. They’ll tear us to shreds.”

“My guy on the inside tells me that the whole pack won’t follow,” Dan argues. “Not to save a half-breed bitch, anyway. The alpha may be coming, but no one’s going to fight for her. I say we have a little fun with her, then hold her hostage until the alpha hands over some real cash. If I’ve got a knife to her throat when he gets here, he’ll tread carefully. I promise.”

“You’re crazy!” Shawn says. “The only reason I’m still standing here is because I thought I could talk some sense into you, but you’re insane. I’m getting out of here.”

“They’ll get you,” Dan says with satisfaction. “I’m holding all the cards. If they find you in the forest, they’ll hunt you down. The only place you’ll be safe is standing behind me—while I’ve got a knife to this bitch’s throat.”

“Fuck!” Shawn cries, shaking his head. “You’re right, you fucking weasel! Please, I’m begging you, just slit her fucking throat right now, and let’s go.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Dan considers, kneeling down beside me again. “I want to have some fun with her first. It’s such a shame we have to leave that gag on, pretty thing, because I’d love to hear you scream.”

Dan slides his hand into the top of my dress, reaching for my breasts. I struggle against the ground, but he slams his other hand down on my thigh and pins me. As his hard hand grips my leg and slides towards my pussy, I thrash desperately, trying to scream.

“I like that,” Dan mutters. “Are you gonna move like that when I’m on top of you,

pretty thing?”

I sob into the gag, tears pouring down my face. My heart is breaking at the thought of never seeing Nico again, and the pain he'll go through if I can't make it back to him.

And Galen... my love. How stupid I've been. All I had to do was tell you the truth... and now you'll never know it.

Dan grabs me, tugging me towards him and groping me hard. Before I can struggle again, Shawn stiffens and looks into the trees.

“We've got company,” he mutters.

“Fuck,” Dan curses, pulling a long knife out of his boot. “Talk about timing. Help me get her up—”

Wolves begin to howl all around us. It's obvious that the boys are surrounded, and there's no escape.

“Come on,” Dan hisses, yanking me to my feet. He wraps one arm around me to keep me upright, pressing the knife into my neck.

“I'll kill her!” he yells, looking around the clearing. “I can slit her throat before any of you can fucking move, so think carefully about what you're doing!”

“I am,” Galen says, stepping out of the trees. He holds his hands out to the sides, palms up as he walks slowly towards us.

“Stop right there!” Dan screams, digging the knife into my jaw until blood runs down my neck.

“Okay,” Galen says, stopping. “Just calm down, and let’s talk about this. What do you want? Release my mate, and I’ll give you anything you want.”

“You’re a fool!” Dan yells. “You don’t even know that your own pack won’t follow you. You can’t threaten me.”

“I am a fool,” Galen agrees. “I should have killed you the second I saw you.”

“Yeah, you should have,” Dan laughs, shaking me. “You’re too trusting. A bleeding-heart little weenie.”

“As fun as this is, we’re going to need to wrap up,” Galen says. “I want to take my wife home—she’s had a terrible day. Just tell me what you want, and both of us can be on our way.”

Dan laughs, shaking me. “Maybe I want her! Did you think of that?”

“I’m afraid that deal won’t work for me,” Galen says flatly. “I’m trying very hard to be reasonable, but you’re making it difficult.”

“Okay, okay,” Dan says, laughing. “Let’s make a deal, then. How about—”

Dan never gets to finish his sentence. Suddenly, his hands disappear, and I’m falling forward, about to smash into the ground face-first. Just before I smack into the dirt, Galen catches me, carefully turning me over to lie on my back.

Behind me, there is nothing but carnage. Splashes of blood are all over the ground and surrounding trees, with scraps of flesh and bone from both Dan and Shawn scattered around in small clumps. Pack members stalk back and forth, checking the tree line. All of them are soaked in blood.

Galen was just distracting them while the others got into place!

“Oh my God, baby, are you okay?” Galen asks, tugging the gag off my face.

I nod, tears starting to streak down my cheeks. Galen goes to work on the ropes immediately, and within seconds, he has me free.

“Oh, Galen,” I moan, reaching for him. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me into his lap, rocking me back and forth as he strokes my hair.

“Are you alright?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No. I mean, yes. I mean—”

“It’s okay,” Galen says, hugging me to his chest again. “We’ll get the doc to check you out as soon as I get you back into town.”

I nod helplessly, clinging to him. Galen wraps his arms around me even more tightly, and I know now, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this is the safest place on earth.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:22 am

Holding Clara in my arms, rocking her against my chest, I'm almost shattered by the emotions surging through me. Relief, rage, resolution, and regret—I feel all of them in equal measure.

I'm trying my best to comfort her, but I know I'm holding her too tightly. I'm so wound up that snarls keep slipping out between my teeth. When one of my betas kneels beside me, I almost bite his face off.

“Easy, Alpha,” he says gently. “It’s just me.”

“Rick,” I say. “What is it?”

“The area is clear, sir. It was only these two. No evidence of other wolves.”

“Good,” I growl. “Get moving then, and make sure there is a doctor ready when we get back to town.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

Rick moves away from me, calling out to the rest of the pack. Clara trembles in my arms, and I feel regret thudding through my chest.

After all she’s been through today, the last thing she needs is more violence. What the hell am I doing?

“Galen,” she murmurs, reaching up to stroke my face.

I pull back a little and hold her up so I can look into her eyes. “Yes, my love? I’m so sorry, I’m holding you too tight, aren’t I?”

“A bit,” she admits. “But it’s okay. I don’t mind all that much.”

Tears well behind my eyes as I gather her against my chest again and squeeze, rocking back and forth. I know for sure now, I’m comforting myself more than I am her.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “Not just for smothering you right now, but because this happened. I let this happen.”

“Galen, no—”

“Yes! I let those drifters stay. I’m too lenient. I should have been more like my father and chased them off right away.”

“Galen, my love, if you were more like your father, you wouldn’t love me.”

I pull back again, looking down at her. Through the bruises and smears of dirt, her face is more beautiful than ever, and her liquid gold eyes shine with some deep inner magic.

A heritage of the supernatural might have been denied to her, but Clara has a magic all her own. She’s different. Not a wolf, a witch, or a human, really.

Finally, her words sink in, and I blink hard, shaking my head.

Did she just say ‘my love’?

Don’t question it... Maybe I imagined it.

“I’m so sorry,” I say again, for like the fifth time. “I’ll back off a bit.”

With great difficulty, I loosen my grip and ease Clara onto the ground. I support her back with one hand as she sits up.

“There you go. Don’t try to stand up yet,” I warn.

“Copy that,” she mutters, touching her ribs. “I’m wrecked. They kicked me around a bit before you got here.”

“And my only regret right now is that I personally did not tear their throats out,” I snarl.

“Looks like your pack did a pretty good job there,” Clara remarks, looking over my shoulder at the blood-splattered ground.

“Yeah. It was hard to stay in place and draw their attention. I wanted to rush right in and crush their skulls with my bare hands!”

The rage that floods me then is so powerful, I need to turn away. Red waves pulse behind my eyes, and my fists clench so hard my knuckles crack.

“Galen?” Clara reaches out, stroking my cheek. “What’s wrong?”

“Clara, I…” My voice sticks in my throat, and I have to force the words out. “When I realized you were gone, I lost it. Winnie and Mother were there to take Nico, thankfully, because I was completely out of my head.”

Clara smiles, stroking my cheek again.

“As soon as I saw you, I knew Nico had to be safe. You wouldn’t have left him to

come and find me if anything had happened to him.”

“That’s true,” I mutter, trying to keep my voice even. “But if something had happened to Nico as well—I don’t know what I would have done, Clara. I went crazy, blindly attacking my own pack. Mother and Winnie took Nico away, and some of the others had to wrestle me down so I could get control over my wolf again. I would have killed anyone to get to you, Clara.”

When I meet her eyes, she’s staring steadily at me with a small smile on her face. She blinks, and her eyes shimmer with more tears.

I’ve frightened her. Now I’m the big, bad wolf for real.

“Galen—”

“I lost myself to the wolf,” I answer. “To rage and pain. I know I’m not good enough for you—”

“Galen!” she says sharply. “Will you listen to me?”

I stop talking abruptly, feeling like I’ve been digging a big hole, and now I’m in it all the way up to the neck.

I’ve fucked this up, for sure. She will never forgive me.

“Galen, I love you,” she says, wrapping her hands around my neck. “This isn’t the adrenaline talking, or relief at being rescued. I really mean it. I love you, and you can always be honest with me. I love you exactly as you are.”

“Clara,” I murmur, cupping her jaw and feeling painfully overwhelmed. “Exactly as I am? Steel-cold exterior and a goddamn fucking emotional wreck underneath?”

“You aren’t a wreck, my love,” she says. “That’s just the negative self-talk your father put in your head. Any sign of softness, and he berated you, made you hide it. But now you know, love is the strongest force of all.”

I lower my head, struggling with my emotions. I know she’s right, and the words ring through me with the power of truth.

“I love you, Galen. I really, really do, and I want to be with you for the rest of my life.”

I look up at her and I see her beautiful, soft brown eyes, looking at me without fear, with complete faith and trust. The bittersweetness of the moment makes emotion well up in me again, until it feels like my chest is going to burst.

“I love you, too, Clara,” I whisper. “I am yours, now and forever.”

I kiss her gently, careful not to hurt her cut lip and bruised cheek. When I put my arms around her to help her up, she winces, grabbing her side.

“Fucking mongrels!” I swear. “I wish I could kill them twice!”

“I don’t disagree,” Clara says, struggling to breathe. “But for now, can you help me up? I want to get home and see Nico.”

I reach down and wrap my arms around her, lifting her easily and snuggling her against my chest. I make sure I’m holding her knees and shoulders firmly, then set off for home.

“I’m not holding you too tight?” I ask.

“No, my love,” she answers. “It doesn’t hurt.”

I nuzzle her hair, loving the feel of her hands loosely gripping my shoulders and her head bumping gently against my chest. We've barely gone a mile when I realize she's fallen asleep, and after a quick check to make sure she's still breathing, I pick up the pace a little.

Nico needs his mom. I didn't register much before I lit out of there, but I know he was crying.

I can only hope that Mother and Winnie were able to give him the support he needed. My failure to care for Nico this morning is just another one to add to my long list.

The sun is setting by the time I reach the front garden. Lights are burning in all the front windows, and the second I take a step into the driveway, I hear running footsteps inside the house.

"Nico!" Winnie shouts from inside. "Hey, stop!"

My son barrels out through the front door, paying his aunt absolutely no heed. He charges right at us, and Clara stirs, flailing to get down.

"Nico!" she screams, holding out her arms.

"Mom!" Nico cries, tears flooding down his face. When he propels himself into her, I wince in sympathy as she groans over her broken ribs, but she doesn't let him go.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Nico says, pulling back. "Are you hurt?"

"Yeah, kiddo. A few bruises, but I'll be okay."

"Dad," Nico says, looking up at me. He opens his arms, and I reach down and pick him up, hugging him and spinning him around.

“I’m sorry I left you, Nico. I really am.”

“It’s okay, Dad. You had to go get Mom. Aunt Winnie and Grandma took real good care of me.”

“We tried!” Winnie snaps, standing in the middle of the driveway with her hands on her hips. “You don’t make it easy! What the hell were you thinking, to come running out here like that? It could have been dangerous.”

“I could smell Dad and Mom,” Nico protests. “So I knew it was okay.”

“Winnie’s right, Nico,” I say, tapping his chin. “These things can be faked for just this reason—to separate you from the pack. You should always have others with you if you don’t know exactly what you’re walking into.”

“Okay, Dad,” Nico says, nodding. “I’ll remember that.”

“Come on, kiddo, let’s go inside,” Clara says. “I need to lie down for a bit.”

“Winnie, did you get a doctor?” I ask as we head inside.

“We had Doc Hemsley here for a bit, but he got called away. I can get him back, if you like.”

“It’s okay,” Clara says. “I can deal with that tomorrow. For now, I just want to rest and be with my family.”

When we get inside, I’m shocked to see that Mother has spent the afternoon baking. Cinnamon cakes, chocolate muffins, and jam tarts are laid out across the table, as well as sweet herbal tea.

“Come on, Mother,” I say, sitting down on the couch. “Come clean and tell me. You got a special order from the bakery, didn’t you?”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” she says, chuckling. “But my nervous energy had to go somewhere. Nico said he was hungry for sweets, and something just came over me.”

“This isn’t all, either,” Nico says with delight, his face covered in chocolate crumbs as he stuffs a muffin into his mouth. “She also made pizza and fried chicken.”

I look up at my mother with wide eyes. “Excuse me, I’d like to know what you’ve done with Macy Ramses? She looks like you, but she hasn’t spent a day in the kitchen since I was six.”

Mother laughs softly. “Let’s just say I’ve found new inspiration. Don’t expect it to last, though. I can’t get this wound up every day—it’s not good for the heart.”

“Yours?” Clara asks, worried.

“Everyone else’s,” Mother says, toasting the comment with a teacup.

After we eat, Mother and Winnie head home, promising to be back the next day. I curl up on the couch with Clara and Nico, listening to their breathing and the soft throb of their hearts. For a while, everything is peaceful, but when Nico turns over, Clara wakes immediately, wincing in pain.

“Are you okay, my love?”

“He got my bad rib. Hold on, just let me wriggle over.”

I get up and pick Nico up very gently, putting him on a nearby sofa with a blanket wrapped around him. Clara opens her arms, encouraging me to snuggle beside her

again.

“Thanks. I’m glad you didn’t take him to his room. I don’t want to be too far away from him tonight.”

“I understand. We can stay here as long as you like. Can I get you anything?”

“A nip of that sweet brandy would be nice.”

“You got it.”

I go over to the cabinet and pour us both a drink. When I sit down next to Clara, her eyes are dark and troubled.

“What’s wrong, my love? We got those guys—they aren’t coming back.”

“They might be,” she says softly. “Well, if not them, whoever they were working for.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, panic surging in my guts.

“They were talking about getting paid. That someone had given them money to kill me, and once I was dead, they’d get more money.”

“What the fuck?” I mutter, astonished.

“They were obviously going to double-cross them, too. I think the plan was just to break in and kill me—to make it look like a really unfortunate robbery or something. But at the last minute, they decided to go for Nico as well and try to ransom us back to you.”

“Scum!” I hiss, keeping my voice down so I don’t disturb Nico. “Did they say anything else?”

“They said plenty, but nothing specific. They definitely had a pass from other powerful wolves, and Dan, the one that you met here, was acting weird with me in town. You know, that day you found me running around the side streets.”

“Yes, I do remember,” I answer. “You thought he was chasing you.”

“Yeah, I felt silly when I saw it was you, but Dan was still weird to me. I should have trusted my instincts right then and there.”

“Hey, don’t beat yourself up about it. Enough people already did that today.”

Clara chuckles as she takes a sip of brandy. “I’m sorry, my love, but there’s no easy way to say this. The day that Dan bailed me up in town, he made me feel like he knew a lot about me. It was really threatening.”

“Why didn’t you tell me all this?”

“By the time I ran into you, I convinced myself it was nothing. But that’s not what I’m getting at, Galen.”

“What then?”

“That’s the same day Kit was in town, wasn’t it?”

I get Clara’s meaning immediately, and I shake my head. “It can’t be.”

“I’m just saying, I heard them talking, and it sounded like they had a pass from a very powerful wolf—one who has lots of money.”

I think about Kit's massive estate, the generational wealth that practically drips off him everywhere he goes.

All of us are rich, but Kit's in another category entirely.

"And he was in town when Dan bailed me up," Clara presses gently. "We can't ignore that."

"You're right. We can't," I concede, an idea beginning to form in my head. "But I still don't think it's Kit."

"We have to investigate," she urges. "We can't just leave this."

"I don't intend to," I answer, the beginnings of an idea beginning to form in my mind. "I've got a plan, Clara, to draw the bad guys out. But I'm going to need your help to do it."

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A week after the attack, most of my injuries have healed, and I'm finally feeling strong enough to implement Galen's plan.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Galen asks as we leave the house. "I don't like using you as bait."

"All of you are going to be right there," I answer, taking his hands. "I won't be in any danger. Besides, it has to be me."

"There might be better ways of getting him to talk."

"We discussed this already. If you accuse anyone without sufficient evidence, it will cause more dissent amongst the council, and that's exactly what you want to prevent."

"Okay," Galen sighs. "I know you're right. This might not pan out into anything—if he's not the guilty party, then we won't set off any alarm bells with this plan. If I did any major investigations, I could alert the bad guys, and they'd cover their tracks."

"See?" I say, grinning as I link my fingers through his. "It makes perfect sense."

"Are we ready?" Nico asks, standing by the car. "I'm all set for this, Mom. I won't let anything happen to you."

"Oh, sweet boy," I say, running over to hug him. "You don't have to stand up and offer to fight for me—the whole pack will be there. Don't put yourself in danger."

“I’m stronger than you, Mom,” Nico says very seriously. “I can help. Don’t worry.”

“Alright,” I mutter, sighing. “But listen to your dad and the other wolves, okay? You’re still learning.”

“Yes, Mom, I will,” Nico says, his eyes very wide and serious. “I promise.”

I watch him get into the car, a horrible twist of nerves deep in my stomach. I feel like Nico is too young to be mixed up in this, but he’s a shifter, not a human child. He’s faster, stronger, and more mature, and if he doesn’t exercise his special skills, he’ll go mad with boredom.

Not to mention his witch powers. Raising him is going to be a challenge!

As we drive to town, I’m comforted by the thought that Nico has an incredibly big support network in his family and in the pack. I’m confident that we can overcome any difficulty now that all of us are joined in love.

“Okay,” Galen says, parking behind Town Hall. “The others are all in position. You know what to do?”

“Yeah,” I answer, nerves bubbling up in my stomach. “I’m good.”

Galen gives me a searching look, his eyes grave.

“You can still pull out if you want to—”

“No,” I answer firmly. “Let’s do this.”

I get out of the car and walk around the hall, heading for the main street. As I walk, I take deep breaths and stretch my legs, trying to stay calm. The others will be able to

pick up on my vital signs, so if the plan is going to work, I can't let them suspect anything.

The corner near the main bakery is a little crowded, just as we planned. It's a common meeting place in the morning, and the little shop does excellent trade. Strolling up to the tables and chairs out front, I see Sherman and Kyra sitting close together with their heads down.

Here we go.

I cross the small dining area, seeing George and Agnes approaching from the other side. My stomach lurches, but I plow forward, gulping down my fear. When I stop by the table, Sherman looks up at me and smiles quickly, as if he almost forgot to. Kyra nods, giving me only a brief acknowledgment.

"Good morning," I say brightly. "How are you today?"

"Well, thanks," Sherman answers. "How are you, though, after the terrible ordeal you went through?"

"I'm healing," I reply, smiling. "Thank you."

By my side, George and Agnes appear. Neither of them attempts to hide their foul looks.

"Clara," Agnes almost spits at me, "I thought you'd be in bed for much longer than this. You know, being human and all?"

"It's a terrible affliction," I answer, unable to keep a woeful tone out of my voice. "I can't tell you how I've suffered with it."

Kyra snickers and flashes me a thumbs-up. I grin back at her while Agnes glowers, obviously knowing there was a joke involved that she didn't pick up on.

"I assume that measures will now be taken to prevent this from happening again," George says. "Obviously, you aren't safe. Galen will have to put you under guard."

"No, I don't think so," I say pleasantly. "I do have ways of defending myself, and there's no point living my life in fear. You can count on me going through with all my usual routines."

"So, you'll just be walking around town unprotected?" George asks.

I nod, but Agnes cuts in before I can answer.

"She just said that, George!" Agnes snaps. "Will you keep up?"

I have to hide a giggle as I realize Agnes is still sore after my sarcasm went over her head. She looks around the table and finds no sympathy. Her frown deepens.

"Well, I'm going in to get my breakfast," she huffs. "I'll get yours, too, George."

He waves a hand dismissively, which only pisses her off even more. As she flounces away, I put my focus back on Sherman, who's staring at his phone.

"Do you still have plans for expanding the council?" I ask.

He nods, looking up. "I've been chatting with a few people about getting it happening. I'm glad Galen is behind me. Did you say you'll be around town a lot more?"

"Yeah, I'll be here most days. Otherwise, I'd just be back at the house by myself."

“Good to know,” Sherman says, tapping the screen of his phone as he stands up. “Gotta run.”

“Me too, I’m afraid,” Kyra says. “I’m late for an appointment. I’ll chat with you later.”

The two of them go, leaving me and George standing in the back of the deserted dining area, completely alone. He glares at me, making no attempt to hide it. I keep my face blank and do a slow blink, which makes him frown.

“So, George, what is your opinion on Sherman’s changes to the council?” I ask.

“I don’t like it,” he barks. “Galen should not be entertaining it.”

“Oh!” I gasp, making my eyes wide. “Why? What do you think will happen?”

“Chaos—that’s what’s going to happen!” he snaps. “It’s bad enough that the royal bloodline has been corrupted, let alone all this class shifting. It’s obscene!”

“What do you mean?” I ask anxiously. I do another slow blink, which seems to infuriate him.

I know damn well what you mean, but it’s good to see you try to justify yourself.

“I mean that our pack has lost its honor,” he says heatedly. “And we need to fight to win it back.”

“Of course we do!” I agree, using a light tone. “We need the pack to be strong, I completely agree with you!”

George tilts his head, looking at me with one eyebrow raised. “Would you put the

pack before your own needs?" he asks.

I nod enthusiastically.

"Then don't you think you're being a bit selfish, holding on to Galen when he should have a wolf mate?" he goes on.

I lower my eyes. "Maybe. I just don't know. It's all very difficult to process."

George scoffs. "Not surprising. You're really confirming all my beliefs right now."

"What would those be?" I ask, blinking at him again and keeping my face blank.

"Those kidnappers should have finished the damn job," he mutters. "Like they were told to."

"What did you say, George?" I ask innocently.

"Never mind," he answers, grabbing my arm. "Come over here into the side street, so we can talk privately."

"Oh, okay," I reply, letting him pull me aside. "Do you have a plan to protect me? Is there danger?"

"You might say that," he growls. A red flush is creeping up his neck, and I can see rage flickering in his eyes.

He's a real piece of work, this one.

"Thank you, George," I say eagerly. "I can't thank you enough for helping me right now."

“Sure,” he mumbles, looking around to make sure the street is empty. “Now we can really talk.”

“Yes!” I exclaim. “Good. We need to. You were talking about the royal line earlier, and keeping the council pure. I want to help however I can.”

“You can help by fucking disappearing!” George hisses, grabbing me by the throat and shoving me against the wall. “I was loyal to Cliff. We ran the pack for over thirty years together. Everything was going great until you came back!”

“George—”

“Shut up! I can’t believe Galen is even interested in a disgusting mutation like you!”

Geez, George, tell me what you really think.

“Let me go—”

“No! I’m going to protect the pack’s legacy in Cliff’s name! With you gone, Galen will be forced to take another mate. A better one befitting his status.”

I struggle against the wall, clawing at George’s hand. He’s obviously gone off the deep end, and I hope my backup gets here soon.

“First you, then the brat,” George mutters. “He’s attached to that little lump of deformity, so he’s got to go, too.”

“You mean this little brat?” a high, light voice speaks from behind George, and he lets go of me to spin around.

“Nico!” I scream, seeing him standing alone in the middle of the street. “What are

you doing here? Get back!”

“I’m here to rescue you, Mom,” Nico says, smiling. “It’s okay, I got this.”

George growls, shifting as he takes a step towards Nico. He’s old, but he’s also big, powerful, and a very experienced hunter.

Nico stands calmly in the middle of the alley, not looking the slightest bit afraid. He waits until George is very close, then shifts into his wolf shape.

Pure, white light glows around Nico’s body as his wolf shape takes over and grows, quickly becoming much bigger than George’s form. The old wolf tries to back away, but Nico roars and lunges at him, both of them going down in a struggling heap.

“Nico!” I scream, taking a step towards the fight.

Suddenly, Galen is there, right in front of me, pushing me back. “No, Clara, they’ll tear you to shreds!” he shouts.

“But Nico!”

“He’s doing fine,” Galen says.

“How could you let him go?” I yell.

“Let him?” Galen repeats. “That’s totally not what happened.”

The two wolves are still fighting, twisting and snapping at each other as they try to get an advantage. Nico is far bigger and stronger, but George is holding his own with stamina and experience.

We can't intervene. They are too stuck together. Anyone trying to break up the fight would get savaged.

"It's okay, Clara," Winnie says, appearing at my side. "We're all here."

"We've got you, dear," Delia links her arm through mine, giving me a brief hug.

I look around to see a few other pack members have gathered, and one of them is Jacinta. She's watching the fight with a scared look on her face, her arms wrapped tightly around herself.

"I'm sorry, Clara," she whispers. "I wanted you out of the way, but I wouldn't condone this. George has acted against the interests of the pack and lost his honor."

"Thank you, Jacinta," I answer. "I appreciate you saying so."

"I will support you in every endeavor from now on," Jacinta says firmly. "You can count on me."

"The whole pack saw what you did today," Delia says, a proud note in her voice. "Now they all know you are worthy of being our alpha's mate, and that you'll stand up to protect us."

"Thank you," I answer, my eyes still on the fight.

It looks like Nico is starting to tire, and it worries me that George might get the best of him. Galen gets as close as he can, ready to jump in, but the two of them stay twisted together like snakes.

Suddenly, Nico pounces, roaring as he slams his massive front paws down. For a moment, he pins George, but the wily old dog twists and snaps at Nico's leg, digging

his sharp teeth in. Nico howls and backs away, making me rush forward.

Winnie grabs my arm, shaking her head violently. I let her hold me as Galen grabs Nico and George backs away down the alley. He shifts back into his human shape and shakes his fist at us.

“You’ll never take me!” George yells. “I’ll show you! I’ll show all of you!”

Behind George, a tall, slender shadow steps into the alley. All of us react as we see her, and shock breaks across George’s face as he realizes there’s someone behind him.

He turns around slowly to see Macy Ramses standing in the middle of the street, blocking his path.

“Macy!” he gasps. “I never—I mean—I didn’t—you have to listen to me! It’s all lies—I can explain!”

He’s practically jabbering in fear as he backs away. The uneven stones in the road trip him up as he scuttles backwards, and he lands heavily on his ass, one hand up as if to hold Macy at bay.

“I want you to know, George, that what I am about to do, I do in my husband’s name.”

“No, Macy,” George moans. “Please, don’t!”

She glares at him, her eyes so hard, they glint like steel. With a swift wave of her arm, she shifts, a tall, beautiful white wolf appearing as her elegant blue dress slowly flutters to the ground.

“Macy, no!” George screams.

The wolf bares her teeth, snarling. She springs forward to savage George, ripping him open. I back away from the violence, and Winnie hugs me.

“Nico,” I whisper, turning around to find my son. I collapse into Galen’s arms, hugging Nico as hard as I can.

“Mom?” Nico murmurs, still watching Macy take George apart.

“Yes, honey.”

“Excuse my swearing, but Grandma’s a fucking badass.”

I laugh softly, ruffling his hair. “She sure is,” I answer, hugging him.

Galen puts his arms around both of us, and I know deep in my heart that we are safe and all our wounds can finally be given the chance to heal.

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Music swirls through the air, throbbing through my body and making me move my feet. I hold on to Nico's hands as we spin around, perfectly balanced against each other's weight.

The tune changes abruptly, and we try to change direction, but both of us are too dizzy, and we twist together to fall into a heap on the ground.

Nico belows with laughter as he falls against my chest, wriggling with bliss. I dig my fingers into his ribs and tickle him, making him giggle even harder.

"I have to say that was a decent effort," Winnie says, standing over us. "But you just couldn't beat my skill."

"It takes skill to spin around and change directions on cue?" I ask.

Winnie grins, an expression of pure evil. "Obviously, it does, because me and Jerry kicked your asses."

"Point taken," I mutter, rubbing my sore butt.

"Here you go, kiddo," Winnie says, handing Nico a huge lollipop. "Even though you lost, you get a prize, anyway."

"Thanks, Aunt Winnie," Nico says. "If you want to keep up your winning streak, don't go up against me in ping pong, okay?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Winnie says, sounding baffled. "I have

never lost a game in my life!”

Nico laughs. “Bad memory, then. It’s okay, I’ll let you off because it’s your birthday.”

“Galen,” Winnie says, glaring at me over Nico’s head. “What are you teaching this child?”

“Forget about me,” I mutter. “You’re the one teaching him how to cheat.”

“I don’t have to cheat, Dad,” Nico says, looking seriously into my eyes. “Not around Aunt Winnie. She’s just that incompetent.”

I burst out laughing, and Nico does, too. I tickle him again, and we roll around and play fight for a bit.

“I am leaving this madness!” Winnie declares in mock outrage. “I will not be subjected to this on my birthday! Come along, Jerry.”

Jerry gives us an apologetic look. He points after Winnie, shrugs, and follows her.

“They seem like best friends,” Nico remarks.

“Winnie enjoys having a slave, that’s all,” I mutter, chuckling.

“I don’t know. She helps him with the dishes most of the time, and gardening, too.”

“Hmm,” I answer. “Maybe they are best friends, then, but we better not tell them. If Winnie becomes aware of it, she might shift the dynamic.”

“Noted,” Nico laughs. “I’m going to play with the other kids, okay?”

“Sure thing, kiddo. Have fun!”

Nico jumps up and races down the backyard towards the big group of kids playing there. He’s made friends with everyone in school, and there’s no awkwardness at all about him being different.

Changes are being made, but we have to be especially careful with our next generation. We can’t let George’s poison infect anyone else, because our pack is going to embrace new growth and let go of the past.

I get up off the ground, dusting grass from my jeans as I head towards the picnic table. There’s been a huge turnout for Winnie’s birthday, with more than half the pack here to celebrate. I shoulder through the crowd to grab a cold beer, then retreat to the edge of the table.

Sitting over with other older pack members, I see Agnes. She was interrogated after George’s death. Though most of us are sure she had nothing to do with his plan, we are keeping her under close watch, and she seems to be doing everything possible to convince us she is committed to the pack.

Well, she might just be trying to avoid getting eviscerated by my mother.

“Hey, bro.” Winnie appears by my side, jiggling my elbow and making me spill my beer.

“Jesus, Winnie. For fuck’s sake.”

“Calm down, Galen. It’s a flannel, not a silk shirt.”

“I’m more worried about the beer. I want to drink that beer!”

“There’s plenty more,” she laughs. “Thanks for throwing this big bash for me.”

“Don’t mention it,” I say, leaning on her. “I love you, you know.”

“Yeah,” she giggles. “You’re a glutton for punishment, you know, since I can’t stop torturing you.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

A loud whistle sounds from the middle of the yard, and everyone turns to look. To my surprise, Nico is standing in the middle of the yard with his hands up.

“A special birthday gift for Aunt Winnie,” he announces.

Nico closes his eyes and raises his hands, palms up. A white glow shimmers around him, and then small sparks flick up into the sky. As they get higher, they explode into brilliant fireworks, far more vibrant than traditional ones, and with no noise.

I put my arm around Winnie and hold her tight, watching the sky.

“Nico is very powerful,” Winnie says. “He’s getting stronger by the day.”

“I know,” I answer. “But he’s doing extremely well with it.”

“His wolf is bigger and more powerful than any of the others,” she says. “He’ll make a wonderful alpha.”

“Replacing me already?” I tease, shoving her away playfully.

“Wouldn’t dare,” she says. “Just an observation.”

“I’m observing a close relationship developing with you and Jerry,” I answer.

“What’s going on there?”

“Nothing much,” she says in a light tone.

“Maybe you need the bride-for-hire service,” I tease her.

She scoffs. “Jerry can’t afford me!” she laughs. “We pay his wages.”

“Point taken,” I nod, smiling. “But somehow, I feel Iris Porter isn’t done in this area.”

“What about your old pal, Kit?” she asks. “He’s chronically single.”

“He is,” I reply, sighing. “I might recommend it to him. He could use a good woman,”

“Speaking of,” Winnie says, pointing, “I do believe that good woman over there is trying to get your attention.”

I look across the yard to see Clara waving to me, two champagne glasses in one hand and a bottle of Chandon in the other.

“Excuse me, Winnie, but it appears I have a previous engagement,” I quip.

“Don’t let me stand in your way,” she laughs, shoving me.

I make my way around the yard, greeting people as I go. Nico is still doing his fireworks display, standing in the center of the clearing with colored light bursting from his hands. His face is a mixture of excitement and awe, and I know that so long as he respects his powers, he’ll continue to develop them in a safe, responsible way.

He just keeps getting more powerful, though. It makes me wonder what he’ll be able to do when he’s all grown up.

Finally, I make it to the far corner of the garden, and Clara beckons me as she dances

away down the trail into the forest. I chase after her eagerly, finding her over the next rise in a big, soft bed of fresh green clover.

I pounce on her, and she giggles as we roll around in the grass. I pin her under me and take a moment to admire her beautiful smile before I bend down and kiss her.

Clara moans, wrapping her arms around my waist and stroking my back. I press my body against hers, using one hand to roam across the front of her dress and squeeze her breasts.

She gasps, thrusting her hips at me and gripping me with her thighs. I wriggle against her, making her squirm.

“Hmm,” I say in a mock-disappointed tone. “I thought we were coming out here to drink champagne.”

She giggles. “The bottle is right there, if that’s what you’d rather do.”

“I think not,” I answer, giving her breast a hard squeeze so she yelps and jumps against me.

Clara puts her hands around my neck, drawing me down for a deep kiss. She bends against me, soft and warm, lapping at my mouth with her tongue. I sink down into her embrace, relaxing into the sweetness of the moment.

“Ow!” I yell, shock shooting through my body. “Did you just pinch my butt?”

She giggles. “Well, it wasn’t a woodpecker.”

“Well, okay, thank God for that. But, like, ow.”

She laughs, wriggling under me. “Fair’s fair. You want to squeeze me, I get to

squeeze you, too.”

“Alright,” I say, gently rubbing my finger across her lips. “I promise to play nice from now on.”

“I don’t believe you,” she whispers, smiling as she draws me down for another kiss.

“How do I know this isn’t a trick?” I ask. “You might be planning to sabotage my manhood again.”

“You don’t,” she answers simply. “You’re at my mercy.”

I look down into her eyes for a moment, gently stroking her cheek as I admire her. “I am,” I say, leaning down to whisper in her ear. “I am completely and utterly yours.”

Clara laughs, then writhes against me, moaning as she wraps her arms and legs around my shoulders and hips. I feel her lips caress my cheek and turn my face to kiss her, drowning in her hot, eager mouth.

I relax against her, and I’m surprised when she hooks an arm against me and flips us over. She grips my shoulders, rocking back and forth on top of me with her fingers digging into my arms.

“Galen,” she murmurs, leaning down to lay a soft kiss on my lips. “You make me so happy.”

Emotion surges in me, so intense and painful that I can’t identify it. I kiss her back, running my hands along her sides and encouraging her to writhe on top of me.

“Hmm,” she hums. “It feels like you’re ready for action.”

“More than ready,” I reply.

“Good,” she answers, grinning. “That means it’s time to tease you a bit.”

She slithers backwards, flicking open the buttons of my shirt as she goes. Her cool fingers trailing across my chest make me shiver as little lines of pleasure race across my skin.

By the time she gets to my pants, my entire body has stiffened under her touch. When she grabs the zipper on my pants and yanks it open, I almost yell with the need for release.

Clara looks me over, her eyes slowly trailing over my bare chest and belly. Then she puts her hands back on the waistband of my pants and gives them a hard pull, freeing my cock.

I don’t have time to react before she lowers her head and wraps her lips around my cock. Her tongue laps around the shaft while her hot lips tease the tip, and I have to dig my hands into the grass to stop my body jerking up and down.

Clara makes a low sound of pure pleasure, as if she’s eating a delicious ice cream cone. I feel her open her mouth all the way and then sink slowly down, swallowing my cock whole.

My breath starts to burn in sharp, hard gasps. Clara braces her hands against my hips and slowly bobs her head up and down, her tongue lapping at the shaft while she devours every inch of my cock.

She leans back, bracing the base of my cock with her hands as she sucks on the tip. One hand reaches down to squeeze my balls, and my body bucks against the ground as if I’ve been given an electric shock.

My cock thickens under the pressure of her mouth, and she alternates between teasing the head and licking up and down the shaft, then slowly sinking down and

swallowing me down into her hungry throat.

When I'm so hard that I can barely breathe and almost ready to blow, she sits up and wriggles forward. As her thighs grip my hips, I feel the slick, hot lips of her pussy pressing against my throbbing cock.

Clara leans all the way forward, kissing me gently as she reaches down with one hand to join us together. She rocks her hips back and forth as she slowly takes my cock, moaning and gripping my shoulders as she slides down inch by slow inch.

I'm gasping by the time she sinks down against me and leans back, looking at the sky as she grinds her hips downwards. My cock pulses, filling every space inside her and truly joining us as one.

When she grabs my shoulders and starts to thrust back and forth, a cry of pleasure rips from my mouth. I can't move under her as she grips my arms hard enough to hurt and absolutely thrashes me with hard, fast strokes.

My cock gets harder and thicker, throbbing against her slick, wet heat. Her pussy clenches and spasms, gripping my cock and holding me in place as she throws back her head and howls.

The orgasm shudders through her, exploding deep inside and rushing through every inch of her body. Clara collapses against me, panting as her deep inner muscles keep pulsing, spasming around my hard cock as she clings to my shoulders.

I wait for her breathing to slow down a little before I stroke her hair, feeling new shivers awaken inside her as she responds to my touch.

"Was that good, my love?" I ask.

She nods, whimpering helplessly.

“Do you want more?”

“Yes,” she murmurs, tightening her grip on me. “Give me more.”

I grab her shoulders and roll her onto her back, bracing myself against the ground. Clara smiles up at me, rocking her hips forward to wrap her legs around me. I thrust forward until I can feel the end of her, and she digs her heels into my ass to grind against the pressure.

I throw my head back, closing my eyes as I focus on the sensations. Clara writhes under me, grabbing my arms and gripping me with her knees as she begs me to thrust.

“Fuck me,” she mutters. “Please fuck me!”

“Well, since you said please,” I answer, bending down to kiss her. I’m so lost in my own arousal, I can barely speak, and when my lips touch hers, every last scrap of restraint is destroyed.

Groaning, I wrap my arms around her, pinning her to my chest as I thrust hard and fast. Clara clings to me, desperately trying to hold on as another orgasm takes her, leaving her shivering and gasping in my arms.

My cocks swells, impossibly hard against her hugging, wet heat. Moans burst out of my mouth as I gasp for air, the final moment of pressure almost too much. Clara wails and wraps herself around me, grinding as her pussy spasms again, squeezing my cock as my own climax takes me.

I fall forward, my head on her shoulder as my cock jerks and blows inside her, gasps tearing through my lips as the pleasure rips through my body. I cling to her a moment more before rolling off her, then gathering her against my chest.

“I love you, Clara.”

“I love you, too, Galen. My heart and soul are yours—forever.”

I stroke her hair, struggling to contain my emotions. I don’t deserve to be forgiven, and the fact that she could give me a second chance is proof of how big her heart really is. As I cradle her against me, I thank the universe for all that I have, and with that gratitude, I make a promise.

I will honor this bond for the rest of my life and resolve to always be true to myself. I will never allow anything to come between me and the woman I love again.

Clara’s breathing settles, and I rock her gently. The peace in our hearts seems echoed by the entire valley, and finally, I am content.

No, not just content.

With her in my arms, I am finally whole.

THE END